The thought and art of Iurii Dombrovskii.

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THE THOUGHT AND ART OF IURII DOMBROVSKII

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Contents

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To my Mum and Dad, for their continuing love and support; to my husband Steven, for paying the mortgage and keeping me (almost) sane; and to Professor Woodward for fostering my interest in the subject. Thank you all.

Summary

The thesis charts the development of the ideas and artistic techniques in Iurii Dombrovskii's fiction and non-fiction which receive their consummate expression in his last and most important work *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*. The works are considered in chronological fashion and the concomitant evolution of Dombrovskii's art analysed. The central themes of Dombrovskii's fiction are established with special consideration given to the conflict between art and reality which permeates his work.

Evidence of the influence of writers as diverse as Tynianov, Shakespeare and Bulgakov is assessed in relation to the development of Dombrovskii's art, and the inspiration derived from ancient writers, notably Tacitus and Seneca, is explored. Dombrovskii's distinctive analysis of totalitarian evil is examined, with particular reference to the portrait of Stalin in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*.

The overall purpose of the research is to define both the unique qualities of this important writer and his place in the context of 20th century Russian literature.

Chapter 1 - The Biographical Background

Iurii Osipovich Dombrovskii was born in Moscow on 12 May 1909. His parents were highly-educated; his father, Iosif Vital'evich Dombrovskii was an eminent barrister, while his mother, Lidiia Alekseevna Kraineva was a botanist. For all their professional achievements, however, they were unable to provide their son with a happy home life. Dombrovskii's childhood has been described by one friend as "joyless",[1] and the cruelty he suffered is hinted at through the semi-autobiographical character Zybin in the novel *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*.[2] Zybin recalls how his mother used to beat him mercilessly, sometimes with a washing line, while his father turned a blind eye.[3] For Zybin, the situation worsens when his father dies and a step-father appears, and this indeed mirrors Dombrovskii's own experience. Gastev describes how things got "particularly difficult"[4] for Dombrovskii after his father died from cancer in 1920[5] and his mother remarried the botanist N. F. Sludskii.[6]

Biographical information, particularly about the early part of Dombrovskii's life, remains sketchy. We know, for instance, that he had a sister called Marina, but no information about her exists at present.[7] The academic route that Dombrovskii took seems easier to chart. After graduating from the former Medvednikovskii school in Moscow, he went on to enrol on the Higher State Literary Courses (VGLK) in 1926. He

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[1] Iu. Gastev, "I zvezda s zvezdoiu govorit", *Russkaia mysl'*, 3 June 1982, p. 6.
[2] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Sobr. soch.*, Moscow, 1992-1993, vols. I-VI (vol. V). All references to Dombrovskii's works, unless otherwise indicated, are to this edition. In footnotes the edition is referred to as *Sobr. soch.*.
[3] *Sobr. soch.*, V, pp. 262-3.
[4] Gastev, p. 6.
[5] Peter Doyle, working from information provided by Dombrovskii's niece, D. T. Portnova, gives the precise date of Iosif's death as 17 March 1920 ("Iurii Dombrovskii's Exile in Alma-Ata", *Slavonica*, 1995-6, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 89). Gastev thus inaccurately reports that the death occurred in 1919 (Gastev, p. 6).
[6] See V. Proskurin, "'V rassvet moi, smiaty shchestviem bedy ...' (K 80-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia Iu. O. Dombrovskogo)", Alma-Ata, 1990, p. 4.
[7] The only references to her appear in Dombrovskii's letters to his friend L. V. Varpakhovskii ("'Stol'ko perezhili, chto bessmertny'", *Nashe nasledie*, Vol. 20, 1991, No. 2, p. 111).

studied here until approximately 1930, after which time he enrolled at the Lunarcharskii State Institute of Theatrical Art ("GITIS"). It was while he was a student that Dombrovskii began writing poetry in earnest, influenced by popular poets of the day such as Bednyi, Poletaev and Bezymenskii.[8] In later years he was to recall the "lofty, incomprehensible" poetry he wrote in these early years with considerable embarrassment,[9] but it started a passion for poetry-writing that was to remain with him throughout his life.

It was also while still a student that Dombrovskii was first arrested, on the night of 20-21 September 1932.[10] The precise reason for the arrest remains contentious. Doyle records that it was the result of a denunciation by a minor poet, Leonid Lavrov;[11] Dombrovskii's friend, A. Zhovtis, states vaguely that it was prompted by "political" motives;[12] while another commentator claims that it was brought about because Dombrovskii had blocked a vote on the fate of the perpetrators of a student prank that had gone wrong.[13] Whatever the exact reason for the arrest, Dombrovskii was sentenced to three years' imprisonment, which was subsequently commuted to three years' exile. In 1933 the young Dombrovskii was thus sent to Kazakhstan,[14] where he settled in the capital Alma-Ata. Here he started teaching, and was appointed head of a

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[8] See Iu. Dombrovskii, "Dereviannyi dom na ulitse Gogolia", in *Sobr. soch.*, I, p. 305.
[9] Ibid., p. 306.
[10] See P. Doyle, p. 71.
[11] Ibid., p. 72.
[12] A. Zhovtis, "Vopreki epokhe i sudbe", *Neva*, No. 1, 1990, p. 174.
[13] H. Chatelain in Iouri Dombrovski, *Le singe vient réclamer son crâne*, Paris, 1992, p. 8. Support for this explanation is provided by *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, in which Zybin is first interrogated by the authorities precisely for this reason (*Sobr. soch.*, V, pp. 151-3). While most commentators claim that Dombrovskii was first arrested in 1932, however, Zybin's interrogation takes place in 1930, and he is released straightaway afterwards.
[14] I. Shenfel'd, in the face of almost overwhelming evidence to the contrary, asserts that Dombrovskii was not a political exile. Instead, he claims that Dombrovskii left Moscow of his own volition because of increasing friction with his step-father (I. Shenfel'd, "Krugi zhizni i tvorchestva Iuriia Dombrovskogo", *Grani*, No. 111-112, 1979, p. 351).

primary school.[15] He also organised preparatory courses for students seeking entry to institutes.[16] It was not long, however, before he fell foul of the authorities once again. On 26 April 1935 he was re-arrested and kept in solitary confinement in Alma-Ata for almost six months until 21 September.[17] On this occasion the charge levelled against him was embezzlement of school funds,[18] but he was subsequently cleared of all charges and released.

Following this release Dombrovskii worked briefly as a cataloguer in the Pushkin State library in Alma-Ata,[19] but then went back to teaching, this time at secondary school No. 16.[20] Here he taught Russian literature, which perhaps provided the inspiration he needed to begin his first novel, based on Derzhavin. Dombrovskii's literary career appeared to be burgeoning. In 1937 *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* published two of his film reviews[21] as well as articles on Batiushkov, Kiukhel'beker, Goncharov and Rousseau. A controversial piece which Dombrovskii wrote about his experience at the Pushkin library also appeared in print.[22] In the summer of this same year, the first chapter of the novel *Derzhavin* was

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[15] See Doyle, p. 72. Cf. Chatelain, p. 9; Zhovtis, p. 174. One of the main reasons that Shenfel'd believes Iurii went to Alma-Ata on his own volition is precisely because he was able to start teaching there, a privilege which Shenfel'd claims would have been denied him had he been a political exile (Shenfel'd, p. 353).

[16] Gastev, p. 6. Cf. Doyle's comment that the school "also provided courses for newly-literate adults" (p. 72).

[17] There is much confusion about the actual date of this arrest. I. Shtokman claims that it took place in 1937 (I. Shtokman, "Strela v polete. (Uroki biografii Iu. Dombrovskogo)", *Voprosy literatury*, 1989, No. 3, p. 84), whereas Dombrovskii himself makes reference to an arrest order that was issued for him in 1936 (see *Sobr. soch.*, VI, p. 297). These particular dates in 1935 are provided by Doyle, and may be deemed reliable as they are taken from an official document issued by the Alma-Ata People's Court (see Doyle, pp. 72, 86).

[18] See A. Zhovtis, p. 174; Chatelain, p. 9; and the detailed information provided by Doyle, p. 72. Gastev, however, claims that the arrest was the result of Dombrovskii "illegally" organising courses for students (see Gastev, p. 6).

[19] See Iu. Dombrovskii, "Dereviannyi dom na ulitse Gogolia", *Sobr. soch.*, I, p. 296.

[20] See Doyle, p. 72; Proskurin, p. 5.

[21] The two films Dombrovskii reviewed were *Prikliucheniia Toma Soiera* and *Zhenit'ba* (see "Dereviannyi dom na ulitse Gogolia", *Sobr. soch.*, I, p. 301).

[22] The article, entitled "Knizhnye bogatstva Kazakhstana" caused a furore, as it was critical of the way in which the library was being run (see Iu. Dombrovskii, ibid., *Sobr. soch.*, I, p. 291).

published by the journal *Literaturnyi Kazakhstan*.[23] The publication continued in 1938 under the new title *Krushenie imperii* (*The Fall of an Empire*), [24] though when the novel was published in 1939 in book form the original title was restored.[25]

Dombrovskii gave up teaching in order to pursue his literary career full-time, but financial constraints led to him taking up the position of curator in the Central Museum of Kazakhstan on August 1 1938.[26] His experiences here provided him with the material for a new novel entitled *Khranitel' drevnostei*, which he began writing at around this time. The first version of this novel was completed by 1939 and its publication announced in *Literaturnyi Kazakhstan*. Just as it looked as if Dombrovskii's literary career was taking off, however, fate intervened. On 26 August 1939 he was once more arrested in Moscow, where he had gone to make preparations for the publication of *Khranitel' drevnostei*. [27] This time, unlike the previous occasion, there was no fortuitous release, and on 31 March 1940 he was sentenced according to Article 58 of the Soviet legal code to ten years' imprisonment and to three years' disfranchisement.[28] Needless to say, any plans that *Literaturnyi Kazakhstan* had for *Khranitel' drevnostei* were hastily dropped.

Dombrovskii, like thousands of other 'repeat offenders', was rounded up and sent to prison camp on the basis of a false denunciation.[29] His first destination was Sevvostlag in Kazakhstan,[30] after which time he was sent to Kolyma. Little is known about his experiences here, except what

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[23] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Derzhavin*, *Literaturnyi Kazakhstan*, 1937, No. 7, pp. 109-132.
[24] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Krushenie imperii*, *Literaturnyi Kazakhstan*, 1938, Nos. 1-4.
[25] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Derzhavin*, Alma-Ata, 1939.
[26] See Doyle, p. 75.
[27] See Doyle, p. 77; Proskurin, p. 5.
[28] See Proskurin, p. 5.
[29] See G. Anisimov and M. Emtsev, "Etot khranitel' drevnostei. (O pisatele Iurii Dombrovskom i ego knigakh)", in Iu. Dombrovskii, *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, Moscow, 1989, p. 705. Cf. Doyle, p. 77.
[30] See Doyle, p. 77.

can be gleaned from his correspondence. We learn, for example, that Dombrovskii owed his life to a fellow prisoner, Leonid Varpakhovskii, after he dragged him on to a steamboat when his legs failed him (had he not done this, then Dombrovskii would have been shot by the guards).[31] We also learn from this correspondence that Dombrovskii had got married sometime prior to this incarceration, as he makes a reference to talking about his wife in camp.[32]

Dombrovskii was finally released from camp on the grounds of ill-health in 1943. In 1938 he had been diagnosed as suffering from severe epilepsy,[33] and the conditions in camp had only served to exacerbate his already poor health. His legs were paralysed, as a result of which he was confined to bed for two years, first in prison camp and then later in hospital. The urge to continue writing was so great, however, that he spent his time while bed-ridden composing his second novel, *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom*. This novel was completed by October 1946, and accepted for publication by the "Moskovskii rabochii" publishing house.[34]

Once Dombrovskii's health began to improve, however, he was forced to break off from his writing in order to "earn his daily bread", as he puts it.[35] The problem of earning enough to live on was one that dogged him throughout his life. In 1972 he admitted his frustration at continually having to do paid work when all he wanted to do was write. He wrote: "All my fury stems from the fact that I haven't always been able to work [that is, to write] but that I have had to earn money – and there's a damnable difference between the two!".[36] In the immediate post-war

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[31] See Dombrovskii's letter to Varpakhovskii, "'Stol'ko perezhili, chto bessmertny" p. 111.
[32] Ibid., p. 110. No information about this first wife, Irina, is presently available. He married his second wife Klara sometime after his rehabilitation in 1956.
[33] See Doyle, p. 75.
[34] See ibid., pp. 81, 88.
[35] "'Stol'ko perezhili, chto bessmertny"', p. 111.
[36] See his letter to O. F. Turumova (the mother of his second wife), in *Sobr. soch.*, VI, p. 373.

years this paid employment took several forms. He worked as a script-writer and a teacher in a cinema-school, in addition to editing and translating works by local Kazakh writers.[37] More significantly, he also taught in the theatre-studio of the Lermontov theatre,[38] where he delivered a course on Shakespeare.

Dombrovskii's passion for Shakespeare inevitably permeated his own writing. By 1946 he had produced his first short story on the Bard entitled *Smuglaia ledi.* The increasingly oppressive Zhdanovite atmosphere, however, meant that this story, like *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* had to wait over a decade before it was finally published, even though it had the backing of such an influential writer as Fadeev.[39] In these immediate post-war years Dombrovskii also wrote the beginning of a novel entitled *Drognuvshaia noch'* but unfortunately we have no access to this work. The author thought it to be so "hopelessly bad" that he gave away his only copy.[40]

The rejection of Dombrovskii's works for publication was not the only effect of the new clamp-down. In the light of Zhdanov's decrees, local writers in Alma-Ata began publicly criticizing Dombrovskii for his approach to literature. These attacks culminated in 1949 with an article entitled "Povysit' bditel'nost' na ideologicheskom fronte" which appeared in *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* (ironically the very newspaper that had first published Dombrovskii's works in the 30s). Written by a local author by the name of Dmitrii Snegin, the article accused Dombrovskii of being "almost the most sinister figure among the anti-patriots and rootless cosmopolitans" in Alma-Ata and lambasted him for failing to

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[37] See "'Stol'ko perezhili, chto bessmertny"', p. 111; Doyle, pp. 79-80.
[38] Zhovtis worked alongside Dombrovskii at this school in the years 1946-7 (see Zhovtis, p. 171). See also Doyle, p. 79.
[39] See "'Stol'ko perezhili, chto bessmertny'", p. 111.
[40] See "Pis'mo Sergeiu Antonovu", *Sobr. soch.*, VI, p. 330.

write on "Soviet" themes.[41] Further "proof" of Dombrovskii's "anti-Soviet" behaviour is provided in the article by reference to his State-funded trip to a local *kolkhoz*. Dombrovskii had been sent to gather material for an article about life on this collective farm and on the Soviet "heroes of labour"[42] who worked there. He returned, however, with nothing more than descriptive passages on the natural beauty of the area, and was unable even to recall the name of the *kolkhoz* on which he was supposed to have been reporting. Not surprisingly, Dombrovskii was arrested a matter of days after Snegin's article appeared, on 29 March 1949, and was charged with "antipatriotism, cosmopolitanism and defeatism",[43] all of which again fell under the broad sweep of Article 58, Paragraph 10 of the Soviet legal code.[44] Among the "evidence" collected by the NKVD were two of Dombrovskii's works, the novel *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* and the unfinished *Drognuvshaia noch'*. The case against Dombrovskii was "strengthened" by the testimony of certain witnesses. One of these, Irina Strelkova, a former neighbour of Dombrovskii's who had introduced him to the works of Hemingway, now came forward and accused him of being "anti-Soviet" for reading precisely such a Western author.[45] Dombrovskii was subsequently found guilty of the charges and on 13 August 1949 was sentenced to a further ten years in prison camp.

This time he was sent not to Kolyma but to Taishet in Eastern Siberia. He spent six years here; he called the experience "indescribable".[46] Prisoners who were at this camp at the same time as him are more forthcoming about how he coped with the "indescribable". Arman

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[41] *Kazkhstanskaia pravda*, No. 56, 20 March 1949, p. 3.
[42] V. Vasil'chenko in Iu. Dombrovskii, *Sobr. soch.*, VI, p. 350.
[43] See "Pis'mo Sergeiu Antonovu", *Sobr. soch.*, VI, p. 329
[44] In *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* Zybin's cell-mate Buddo calls this Article a "universal one" which "suits everyone" (p. 146).
[45] Ibid., p. 332.
[46] Iu. Dombrovskii, "'Stol'ko perezhili, chto bessmertny'", p. 111.

Malumian gives details of how Dombrovskii managed to maintain his dignity even in the face of appalling conditions. He tells how Dombrovskii abhorred the "toadying and cowardice" of those who would go to any lengths to survive, and relates how he used to conduct discussions about Kierkegaard and Heidegger in their cramped, stench-filled cell.[47] Dombrovskii's steadfastness in adversity prompted another former *zek* to liken him to an "arrow in flight".[48]

E. Tsvetkov has commented how prison camp broke many people, but elevated a few to a permanently higher level.[49] Iurii Dombrovskii was one of these few. He used his time in camp to expand his already formidable knowledge. He studied Roman history in earnest, taking advantage of the expertise afforded by imprisoned professors,[50] and he mastered Latin, which not only allowed him to read Tacitus, but also to outwit the censors by using it in correspondence with his mother.[51]

Even though Dombrovskii was clearly an intellectual, his uncompromising attitude won him friends across the spectrum of the prison camp. Anisimov and Emtsev tell how he was respected in camp even by the common thieves, who would call him "Gypsy" because of his swarthy appearance.[52] As friends from outside camp testify, this ability to relate to people from all walks of life was one of Dombrovskii's main qualities.[53]

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[47] Arman Malumian, "I dazhe nashi slezy ...", *Kontinent*, Vol. 20, 1979, pp. 338, 341.
[48] See Shtokman, p. 84.
[49] E. Tsvetkov, "Khranitel' drevnostei. Pamiati Iurii Iosifovicha Dombrovskogo", *Vremia i my*, Vol. 30, 1978, p. 119.
[50] See Zhovtis, p. 175.
[51] See Malumian, p. 343; Zhovtis, p. 175.
[52] Anisimov and Emtsev, "Etot khranitel' drevnostei", p. 697. In his essay "Tsygany shumnoiu tolpoi ..." Dombrovskii recalls that his great-grandfather was a gypsy who was exiled with Polish rebels in 1863 to Irkutsk (VI, p. 190). He also described his nationality as "gypsy" when completing official police forms (see Chatelain, p. 6) and on one occasion even offered his services as a fortune-teller to the wife of a friend (see V. Nepomniashchii, 'Homo liber (Iurii Dombrovskii)', *Novyi mir*, 1991, No. 5, p. 235).
[53] See Anisimov and Emtsev, "Etot khranitel' drevnostei", p. 699; Nepomniashchii, p. 236.

Dombrovskii was finally released from camp in October 1955. He moved back to his native city of Moscow, where he started to pick up the pieces of his life once more. His focus turned again to writing. In camp he had written a sizeable amount of poetry about his experiences, but he did not intend this for publication. Treating his ordeal as merely a "fact of history",[54] he kept the poems to himself and read them out only in the circle of his closest friends.[55] Nor did he have any thoughts of publishing his novel *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom*, for he was under the impression that it had been destroyed following his arrest. Shortly after his return to Moscow, however, the former KGB archivist who had been instructed to burn the work suddenly turned up on his doorstep, informed him that after reading it he had been unable to carry out the order, and handed the manuscript to him.[56] Dombrovskii set to work writing a prologue and an epilogue to the novel and, after much wrangling, it finally appeared in print in 1959, sixteen years after its inception.[57]

Dombrovskii had at this time also begun work on *Khranitel' drevnostei* which, together with the later novel *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, was to constitute his two-part *magnum opus*. In 1957 he wrote to Varpakhovskii that, in between such "disagreeable" tasks as translating, he was working in fits and starts on a "new work".[58] Evidence that Dombrovskii was in fact writing *Khranitel' drevnostei* is provided by Vladimir Maksimov. He states that by 1959 Dombrovskii had already started writing two novels or, as he clarifies it, "one big novel made up of two books".[59]

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[54] J. Cathala, "Iouri Dombrovski ou la leçon de ténèbres", in Iouri Dombrovski, *La Faculté de l'Inutile*, translated by Dmitri Sesemann and Jean Cathala, Paris, 1979, p. 433.
[55] See Tsevtkov, p. 120; Gastev, p. 6.
[56] See *Sobr. soch.*, II, pp. 456-7; "Stol'ko perezhili, chto bessmertny", p. 111.
[57] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom*, Moscow, 1959. The difficulty Dombrovskii had in trying to find a publisher for the work is outlined by Shenfel'd, p. 361.
[58] "'Stol'ko perezhili, chto bessmertny'", p. 111.
[59] M. Geller and V. Maksimov, "Besedy o sovremennykh russkikh pisateliakh: Iurii Dombrovskii", *Strelets*, No. 7, 1987, p. 21.

Khranitel' drevnostei, the first "book" of this "big novel", was published in 1964 in the July and August editions of *Novyi mir*. Three months after this debut, Dombrovskii began work on the second "book", *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*. At this time the political atmosphere was still relatively relaxed, but the Prague spring changed all this. Dombrovskii continued with his work on the novel, even though he came to realise that the chances of it being published in the Soviet Union were increasingly slight. Indeed, by 1973 he had given up hope of having this novel published and was writing solely "for the drawer".[60] Several shorter, less controversial works did, however, appear during these years of political stagnation. 1969 saw the publication of Dombrovskii's cycle of three stories about Shakespeare entitled *Smuglaia ledi*[61] and the short story *Tsarevna-Lebed'* [62] appeared four years later. In 1974 another short story, *Ledi Makbet*,[63] was published and in the same year Dombrovskii's collection of essays entitled *Fakel*[64] appeared in Alma-Ata, albeit with a paltry circulation.[65]

Dombrovskii finally completed *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* in 1975, eleven years after he had started it. He was apparently reluctant to let the novel be published as *tamizdat*,[66] but three years later he gave permission for it to be published in France. Dombrovskii lived just long enough to see this publication; he died two months later, on 29 May 1978. At Dombrovskii's post-mortem it was revealed that he had liver cancer,[67] which was probably the result of his propensity for heavy drinking. It is not clear whether this was the direct cause of his death, however, as in

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[60] Cathala, p. 434.
[61] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Smuglaia ledi. Tri novelly o Shekspire*, Moscow, 1969.
[62] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Tsarevna-Lebed'*, *Sel'skaia molodezh'*, 1973, No. 4.
[63] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Ledi Makbet*, *Sel'skaia molodezh'*, 1974, No. 1.
[64] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Fakel. Rasskazy*, Alma-Ata, 1974.
[65] This edition consisted of only twelve thousand copies. See Shenfel'd, p. 373.
[66] See Zhovtis, p. 179.
[67] See Gastev, p. 6.

November 1977 Dombrovskii had received a severe beating.[68] Although Shenfel'd states that the perpetrators of this act were "persons unknown",[69] the inference is that they were KGB agents.

In his collection of essays entitled *Fakel* Dombrovskii rhetorically asks: "Does the path of a true artist really end with his death?"[70] His own case proves overwhelmingly that it certainly does not. In 1979 *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* won the prize for Best Foreign Book in Paris, and 1988 saw the posthumous publication of this novel in Dombrovskii's homeland.[71]

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[68] See Shenfel'd, p. 375. In a letter to S. Tkhorzhevskii in April 1978, Dombrovskii reveals that he has had his arm broken (when or by whom is not disclosed), and has himself managed to break his collarbone (see S. Tkhorzhevskii, 'Nespokoinyi pisatel'. K 80-letiiu Iuriia Dombrovskogo', *Zvezda*, 1989, No. 7, p. 199).

[69] Shenfel'd, p. 375.

[70] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Sobr. soch.*, VI, p. 25.

[71] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, *Novyi mir*, 1988, Nos. 8-11.

Chapter 2 - *Derzhavin*

> At the beginning of April 1937 on one of the brightest of days, sparkling with the brilliance of glass - how distinctly I remember it! - my fate was suddenly determined. I finally "plucked up the courage", as they used to say then, presented myself at the editorial office of the journal *Literaturnyi Kazakhstan*, and placed before the editorial secretary my first attempt - the "novel" "Derzhavin".
> Willy-nilly I must now put both of these words in inverted commas, because my "novel" consisted of only 40-45 pages - at that time I wasn't capable of any more.[1]

This event, recalled here by Dombrovskii as he neared the end of his life, marked the beginning of his literary career. Within a matter of months his "novel" had made its debut in the journal, and it reappeared the following year, modified and extended, under the title *Krushenie imperii*. This second version of the novel is the form in which it is read today, although the title has reverted to *Derzhavin*.

At the time that he wrote the novel Dombrovskii was teaching advanced literary courses, and so his choice of subject may not appear all that surprising.[2] What is surprising, however, is his treatment of the subject. Instead of depicting Derzhavin's literary development, Dombrovskii focuses on the poet's early military career. "My Derzhavin," he commented, "does not write poetry, except for scribbling things down in an exercise book."[3] The portrait that emerges, therefore, is not the traditional one of the great artist, but that of a "clever, shrewd, sharp and rather unscrupulous soldier", who is ready to "plunge into all sorts of dissipation"

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[1] *Sobr. soch.*, I, p. 289.
[2] This, at least, was the conclusion that Bocharnikov, the editorial secretary of *Literaturnyi Kazakhstan*, reached on learning of Dombrovskii's teaching. "'Ah-ha', he laughed. 'So that's where your Derzhavin comes from'" (ibid., p. 296).
[3] Ibid., p. 295.

in order to reach his goals.[4] The backdrop for this portrait is the Pugachev rebellion of 1773-4, and the narrative follows Derzhavin's army experience during these years.

The account begins with Derzhavin's appointment to the Secret Commission, a body that was established in Kazan' by General Bibikov for the purpose of rooting out Pugachev's rebels. He approaches Bibikov and impresses him so much with his daring and determination that he is given the task of spying on government troops. He is also entrusted with the responsibility for interrogating and torturing detainees of the Commission, and quickly makes his mark with the zeal with which he carries out these duties. His attitude to his work begins to change, however, when he interrogates one particular prisoner by the name of Ivan Khalevin. Formerly the burgomaster of Samara, Khalevin had openly greeted the rebels as they marched on the city, even arranging for church bells to be rung in their honour. Derzhavin learns that Khalevin is driven by an overwhelming belief that all men are essentially equal,[5] and this notion begins to make him question his own actions. The change in his attitude is further precipitated by his chance reading of a poem by Sumarokov entitled "O suetnosti", which denounces all earthly glory as futile in the face of death. Shortly after reading this poem he himself starts to write verse in earnest. The growing conflict which Derzhavin experiences between his duty to the State and his conscience culminates in the episode in which he allows Khalevin to escape while in his custody.

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[4] Ibid., p. 302. In this respect the portrait anticipates the similarly unorthodox approach that Dombrovskii was later to adopt towards Shakespeare in his cycle of short stories entitled *Smuglaia ledi*. There likewise the traditional image is replaced, in part, by that of the Bard as a dissipated libertine.

[5] Khalevin's ideas, as he acknowledges, are borrowed from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Prior to *Derzhavin*, Dombrovskii had written an article on this French thinker ("Zhan-Zhak Russo (k 225-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia)", *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, 8 July, 1937).

The focus of the story then switches to a scheme to kill Pugachev. This plan is formulated by a peasant called Serebriakov and revolves around an elderly schismatic, Iov, whose role is to infiltrate the rebel camp by posing as a "holy fool" and to lure Pugachev away to his death. Serebriakov suggests the idea to Derzhavin, who in turn seeks the backing of Bibikov. The plan is approved, and Iov, accompanied by a dim-witted peasant named Diupin, sets off for the Irgiz river, where the rebels have their base. Impatiently Derzhavin awaits news from his two spies, but none is forthcoming, and the failure of the plan is confirmed when Serebriakov returns to report that the whole area is under rebel control and that the town of Iaik is under siege. As no government troops are in the vicinity, Derzhavin resolves to march on Iaik himself and liberate the town, and he writes at once to the local governor Krechetnikov, requesting thirty Cossacks. The request is rejected, because Krechetnikov has been informed that, in reality, Pugachev's army has been routed and that all the troops at his disposal must be sent to the area to mop up any remaining rebels. Deliberately concealing this information from Derzhavin, he allows him to march on toward Iaik with a motley bunch of peasants. As they near the town, Derzhavin receives two letters which seal his fate. The first, delivered by Iov (who is now exposed as having double-crossed Derzhavin at the earliest opportunity), tells how the town of Iaik has already been liberated by General Mansurov and his troops. The second, which arrives by courier, deals Derzhavin the final blow, as it informs him of the death of General Bibikov. Thus deprived of his patron in his hour of greatest need, he is depicted in the novel's final scene contemplating the ruins of his military career.

For all the unorthodox nature of Dombrovskii's portrait of Derzhavin, he nevertheless adheres to the basic facts of the poet's biography. Indeed, his

attention to historical detail, which is a prominent feature of his later works,[6] is already in evidence here. Before starting to write the novel, he consulted *inter alia* two biographies of Derzhavin and volumes V and VI of Ia. Grot's nine-volume edition of the poet's works (1864-83), that is, the volumes which contained his correspondence and his celebrated *Zapiski*.[7] Virtually all the events which occur in the narrative are drawn directly from these sources. Likewise, the Derzhavin who appears in the text is a mirror-image of the man portrayed in the *Zapiski*. A native of Kazan', raised in poverty by his widowed mother, he is frustrated by his slow progress through the ranks after ten years of service[8] and is acutely aware of the disadvantages of his birth. His remark in the novel that "if you are not rich or distinguished, then don't dare even to think about happiness" (p. 219) echoes his lament in the *Zapiski* that "brilliance and wealth and high birth" are preferred to unstinting dedication to duty.[9]

In the entire course of the novel deviations from the *Zapiski* are rare. Even minor, anecdotal details are included, such as Derzhavin's ambush of a peasant convoy in order to ascertain whether the town of Simbirsk has fallen or not (pp. 70-1).[10] Where divergences do arise, therefore, they stand out prominently. A noteworthy example is the description of the procedures followed by the Secret Commission. In the *Zapiski* very little information is given about the day-to-day workings of this body. Derzhavin mentions only that all testimonies had to be personally hand-written by the interrogators, and that offenders' names were put into an

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[6] While writing the chapters relating to Christ in the novel *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* Dombrovskii consulted over one thousand books (see G. Anisimov, M. Emtsev, "Etot khranitel' drevnostei", p. 699).
[7] See *Sobr. soch.*, I, p. 306
[8] Ibid, p. 429. Cf. Iu. Dombrovskii, I, 18.
[9] G. R. Derzhavin, *Sochineniia Derzhavina* (Tom 6, *Perepiska 1794-1816*), Moscow, 1973, p. 460.
[10] Ibid., p. 469.

alphabetical list.[11] In the novel, in contrast, the workings of the Commission are described in detail, as the following passage on the procedure used during the interrogation of suspects illustrates:

> The investigators listened to the accused patiently without interrupting, but took nothing down. Then came the thorough and painstaking processing of the testimonies. Dozens of names were called out, and the most detailed testimony was demanded of each of them. These people, who were still at liberty, had to be stifled, confused, made to believe straightaway in the omniscience of the commission. For this reason the investigators were interested in the slightest detail about them, noting not only the words but also the tone of voice in which they were spoken. Having caught some inessential detail, the investigators would turn it all ways, give it a hundred different interpretations and, finally, having chosen the most effective, they would note it down on the charge sheet. In this way any word that was thrown out in passing and immediately forgotten could be interpreted as high treason (p. 73).

The contrived nature of the investigation, along with the doctoring of evidence, bears an obvious resemblance to Soviet legal practices in the 1930s, of which Dombrovskii had already had first-hand experience by the time of writing the novel. Indeed, as the critic Shtokman has noted, there are distinct echoes of the novel's account of these procedures in a long letter of complaint about Soviet justice which Dombrovskii sent on 1 January 1956 to the member of the Central Committee A. G. Aristov.[12]

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[11] Ibid., pp. 473-4. Dombrovskii notes in the novel Derzhavin's habit of listing prisoners alphabetically (p. 76).

[12] Shtokman, p. 90. The letter - or "memorandum" as Dombrovskii calls it - is reproduced in *Sobr. soch.*, VI, pp. 314-325. This detailed document supports Nepomniashchii's claim that Dombrovskii was an "expert" on legal procedures (Nepomniashchii, p. 237).

Interrogations, however, are not the Commission's only means of extracting confessions from reticent prisoners. Torture is also routinely employed, and Dombrovskii again gives us a detailed account of this "science". In a passage loaded with "irate sarcasm"[13] he describes the torture chamber:

> If the prisoners did not wish to repeat seditious speeches voluntarily, they were taken away to the basement, where a special room had been fitted out. In that dark heated room with its thin blueish air it was always frightening: water boiled, burning hot iron sizzled and the fine, keen whistle of lashes was heard. The skilful hand of the executioner dragged out of the twisted human body all the marvels of pain stored in it. The experienced executioners painstakingly studied the art of suffering as they operated on the mottled bodies of the secret prisoners. They squeezed the body in a business-like manner into ugly wooden frames, tightened up the screws on it, and stretched it out on a rope until it was like the string of a musical instrument. They calculated the number of turns of the screw, the hours spent on the rack, the minutes spent beneath the lash. Unclean, like rusty fruit, the bodies of the prisoners told them at first glance the type and amount of the required torture.
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> The water gurgled, the red-hot iron hissed, the rack creaked. To these technical sounds - the chatter of iron and metal, boiling water and stone - were added others. Bones cracked, sinews snapped drily, seared flesh sizzled. The executioners had become so accustomed to the prayers, shouts and penitential moans that accompanied these sounds that they no longer even heard them (pp. 74-5).

[13] Shtokman, p. 87.

Once more the allusion to the barbaric practices of the NKVD in the 1930s can hardly be doubted. Dombrovskii's preoccupation with the concept of justice, which permeates his later works, is thus already discernible here.

Another significant deviation in the novel from the account in the *Zapiski* is encountered in the form of Ivan Khalevin. Khalevin is the one character in the work who appears to be wholly fictional, for there is no reference to him either in the *Zapiski* or in any other of the historical records. His role in the novel is twofold; firstly, to voice the ideas about man's equality which are implied in the conflict between Pugachev and the State,[14] and, secondly, to prompt with these ideas Derzhavin's noted change of attitude.

Derzhavin interrogates Khalevin on several occasions, yet it is only when he comes across Sumarokov's poem "O suetnosti" that he starts to realise the significance of his prisoner's views. The central idea of the poem is that man's aspirations to happiness, splendour and glory are merely a dream in comparison with the all-consuming power of death. On reading these lines Derzhavin sinks to the floor, and his reaction is described as follows:

> Yes, this was something that he had never thought about before. Man is born free, but on earth he goes everywhere in chains - that is how Khalevin had once answered him.[15] At that time he had remained silent and simply wondered how a clever man could sometimes risk his life in the pursuit of a clear and empty phrase. Now though, if such a conversation were to take place again, he would answer that man is free not only in birth, but also in death (p. 129).

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[14] See the reference to this conflict by the historian P. Avrich as a "broad social struggle of the have-nots against the haves" (P. Avrich, *Russian Rebels 1600-1800*, London, 1973, p. 211).

[15] The exchange between Derzhavin and Khalevin referred to here is not included in the narrative. It is implicit in the text that the interrogation process had already been started prior to the first encounter that is described in the novel (pp. 80-5).

The powerful effect that the poem obviously has on Derzhavin demonstrates how Khalevin's views have insidiously changed his way of thinking. He is now suddenly more aware of his own mortality and of the ephemeral nature of the glory after which he is chasing, and this new-found awareness is promptly reflected in two sketches that he now draws. Alongside the self-portrait in which he appears wreathed in a tawdry coronet of laurel leaves he draws a skull resplendent in a crown (p. 131).

Derzhavin's reading of the Sumarokov poem clearly constitutes a turning-point in the novel. According to Shtokman, it marks the transition to the Derzhavin whose image has come down to us through the centuries, the Derzhavin who is "as different from a sharp and shallowly ambitious second lieutenant as a belvedere marble from a cooking pot".[16] Nevertheless, although he certainly undergoes a significant change of attitude, as demonstrated by the type of poetry that he now produces,[17] the ruthless careerist remains very much in evidence. For instance, the only way in which he can grasp the concept of equality immediately after he has finished reading the poem is in terms of money and rank. He bitterly compares his situation with that of Bushuev, Bibikov's personal secretary, who moves through the ranks much more quickly than himself, even though his job entails little risk (p. 129). This indication that Derzhavin has by no means renounced his old quest for glory is borne out later in the novel by his support for the plan to catch Pugachev and his foolhardy march on Iaik.

The change in Derzhavin's attitude, therefore, is not as complete or fundamental as Shtokman would lead us to believe, and there is good reason for this, for an abrupt transformation would have been psychologically unconvincing, given the power of the ambition that drives

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[16] Shtokman, p. 88.

[17] Whereas before he had produced formulaic love poetry (p. 127), he now writes "simple, clear lines" about "death and life and their inevitable equality" (p. 133).

Derzhavin in the early chapters of the novel. By allowing Derzhavin to remain essentially a "shallowly ambitious second lieutenant" and by showing how he commits a number of military errors, Dombrovskii is able to demonstrate graphically the truth expressed by the poem - namely, that all pursuit of earthly glory is in vain.

The conflict that emerges between Derzhavin the careerist and Derzhavin the poet is central to the novel. On the one hand he craves military glory, but on the other he is inexorably drawn to writing poetry. Aware that the two things are not compatible, he tries to abandon poetry when he departs for Samara by leaving behind the notebook in which he writes his poems (p. 54). But to no avail. Within two weeks of arriving in the town he is again writing poetry, much to his irritation. He regards this surrender to the power of his muse as "a catastrophe, an explosion, which overturned and smashed everything that he had done till then" (p. 125). He sees it as ironically marring his happiness at the very moment when his dream of a successful military career appears to be on the verge of fulfilment.

The inner conflict between the unscrupulous soldier and the writer culminates in Derzhavin's vacillation over whether or not to release Khalevin. The result is the remarkable exchange with his prisoner in which he stresses the hopelessness of his position while at the same time suggesting ways in which an escape might be effected (pp. 138-9). We note also the contradiction between the expression on his face, which remained "impassive, as before", and the "obvious hint" that "was perceptible in the interrogator's words" (p. 138). In the end, of course, Khalevin does break free, and although Derzhavin expresses consternation at having left his gun behind when he accompanies him back to the cell, the "joyful, somewhat confused smile" on his bloodied face after Khalevin has struck him (p. 42) confirms the poet's momentary triumph.

The struggle between the soldier and the poet is reflected in the conflict in the novel between the ideas of mortality and immortality. References to death recur in the narrative. Thus Bibikov's young goddaughter Katrin is a widow (p. 16); she appears as the angel of death at a masquerade ball (p. 16); the commandant of Samara is hung by Pugachev's followers shortly after they take the town (p. 43); and four landowners are executed by the rebellious peasants (p. 118). Death is similarly implied when the ataman Cherniai and the foolish peasant Diupin disappear without trace (pp. 163, 217). The effect of these references and allusions to death, which culminate at the end of the novel in the report of Bibikov's death, is to reinforce the idea of Derzhavin's own mortality. As events progress, he becomes increasingly aware that he, too, is only mortal. His first fleeting thoughts about his mortality occur in the opening chapter, when he looks at a statue of a dying soldier. As he contemplates this "elegant death, chiselled out of marble", he is irresistibly prompted to think about himself (p. 18). His growing sense of mortality culminates in a presentiment of death the night before his march on Iaik (p. 211).

The event which clarifies his thoughts on the subject is his reading of Sumarokov's "O suetnosti". After reading this poem he dreams that he is writing poetry, and the theme of this poetry is "death, which is equal to God and from which no-one can hide. Its scythe cuts across all mortals, and no-one can consider himself a happy man until his final hour has come" (pp. 133-4).[18] This view of death as the "great leveller" is foreshadowed in the scene in which Khalevin destroys his art collection. With his servant he piles his portraits of great rulers, from Julius Caesar to Elizabeth I, on to a bonfire and sets light to them (p. 96), and the significance of the scene is

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[18] Cf. the comment on Derzhavin's representation of death in his poetry as an "impassive leveller" which makes all men "equal in their mortality" (P. R. Hart, *G. R. Derzhavin: A Poet's Progress*, Columbus, 1978, p. 31).

expressed by the comment which Dombrovskii is moved to make about the portrait of Charles I: "Neither his purple mantle, nor his crown, nor his belief in the divine origin of royal power saved him. His blood turned out to be exactly the same colour as everyone else's, and his cervical vertebrae crunched just as finely under the heavy axe as any other mortal's" (p. 94). In this manner Dombrovskii introduces one of the major themes both of the novel and of Derzhavin's poetry.

The vanity of Derzhavin's struggle for military glory to which the emphasis on man's mortality alludes, is further underlined in the novel by the sudden reversals of fortune that occur in the course of events. No man, no matter how wealthy or influential, can consider his position safe. The most obvious example is Derzhavin himself, whose promising military career is cut short by his failed march on Iaik. Similarly General Kar, a respected military leader, falls into disgrace when he abandons his troops and refuses to follow orders to return to St. Petersburg (p. 21). Even Bibikov, Derzhavin's distinguished commander, experiences a temporary fall from favour prior to his appointment as head of the Secret Commission (p. 21). These repeated indications of the unstable nature of a man's position in the world would have had a special significance in the Soviet Union in the late 1930s when the novel first appeared, for this was a decade when men frequently fell from power, often with breathtaking suddenness. As Robert Conquest reminds us, of the seven men elected to the Politburo as full members in June 1924, including Bukharin, Zinov'iev and Trotskii, six were to be killed by the sole survivor, Stalin himself.[19] Dombrovskii's emphasis, therefore, on the insecurity of man's position in earthly hierarchies was thus a potent allusion to contemporary events.

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[19] R. Conquest, *Stalin - Breaker of Nations*, London, 1991, p. 133.

The hopelessness of Derzhavin's attempt to achieve glory as a soldier is also conveyed by the similarly recurrent theme of fate. Dombrovskii himself draws attention to this theme when commenting on the disasters which bring Derzhavin's military career to its abrupt end. He writes: "The main thing is that this was not simply damnable bad luck or a painful combination of circumstances, but rather Fate, the force which governed all his subsequent life".[20] The illusion that events are controlled by fate is sustained throughout the novel. It is created from the very beginning, for example, by the scene in which Bibikov's gaze is irresistibly drawn to the young man as he fumbles in his pockets on the street below (p. 15). Even before Katrin enters and reveals his identity (p. 17), it is thus suggested that his destiny is being shaped by unseen forces. Significant also in this connection is Derzhavin's status as a native of Kazan'. This accident of birth is one of his reasons for seeking appointment to the Secret Commission in the first place (p. 22), and it is his appointment to this body which sets in motion the train of events that lead to his crucial contact with Khalevin. It is in later events, however, that the hand of fate is most clearly sensed - for example, in Derzhavin's discovery, on his arrival in Simbirsk, that he has missed Lieutenant-Colonel Grinev by only a matter of hours (p. 60), and in the late thaw which convinces him that General Mansurov will be unable to arrive in time to liberate the besieged town and thus prompts him to take the task upon himself with the noted consequences (p. 200). And we also observe the manner in which Dombrovskii prepares the way for this concluding disaster by evoking throughout the novel the sense of fate as a force which repeatedly intervenes to confound human expectations. It is illustrated, for example, by the episode in which the rebel ataman Arapov expects that a long and

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[20] *Sobr. soch*, I, 303.

bloody battle will be required to win Samara (p. 109) only to find that the town falls without a shot being fired. The effect of such episodes is to induce the justified scepticism with which the reader reacts to Derzhavin's conviction that his nocturnal raid on Iaik has been so meticulously planned that no "unforeseen circumstance" can intervene to prevent its success (p. 211).

This sense of fate's presence in the novel is notably reinforced by the "Pushkinian" devices of fortune-telling and prophetic dreams. Khalevin's cellmate Semenov, for example, uses cards to predict the future, and when he deals the queen, seven and ace of spades, he promptly interprets them as signifying "betrayal, separation and a blow" (p. 77). The allusions are clear: to Khalevin's betrayal of the State, for example, to Iov's betrayal of Derzhavin and his associates, to the separations between Derzhavin and his mother (p. 53) and Diupin and his wife (p. 195), and to the blow which knocks Derzhavin unconscious when Khalevin escapes (p. 141). Similarly the dream in which Semenov exults in the feeling of the wind on his face[21] and the snow beneath his feet on being set free (p. 79) anticipates the feelings which Khalevin experiences when he breaks out of prison.

Premonitions are also experienced both by Derzhavin himself and by his mother. Thus Khalevin's escape is again foreshadowed by the dream in which the hero commands the burgomaster to go away (p. 133), while the dream in which he sees himself falling from the top of a hill clearly points forward to the disastrous conclusion of his hard-won military career (p.

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[21] The association of the wind with freedom recurs in the novel. It is apparent, for example, in the episode in which the sharp winter wind that blows in through a broken window of Khalevin's cell dispels the stuffy air and causes his head to spin (p. 80); in the reference to the wind blowing through his hair when he breaks free (p. 142); in the episodes involving the ataman Cherniai and his search for treasure in the wide-open spaces of the steppes (pp. 159-60); and in the description of Cherniai by the peasant Serebriakov as "a free man, like the wind that blows on the steppe" (p. 165). It also recurs in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, in which both Christ and the released prisoner Georgii Kalandarashvili are described as being completely free, "free like the wind" (*Sobr. soch.*,V, pp. 346, 549).

212). In each case the dream anticipates a reality which he is tempted to take seriously, but which consciously he cannot contemplate, and the same situation is created by the "prophetic dreams" of his mother - dreams in which she sees the fall of Samara to the rebels before his departure for the town (p. 28). When rumours confirming that the town has fallen begin to circulate in Kazan', he still rejects them as "a lie", even though his instinctive reaction is to believe them (p. 30). Again, therefore, we perceive in his reaction an intriguing ambivalence which may clearly be related to the central conflict in his portrait. While the poet is responsive to the truths expressed by the dreams, for the calculating careerist they represent a potent threat to the faith on which his hopes rest - his faith, that is, in the power of the amoral human will and reason.

While the repeated allusions to fate serve to reinforce the idea of the futility of Derzhavin's quest for glory, the contrast that recurs in the novel between reason and emotion serves to underline further the conflict between the soldier and the poet. Emotion in the work is primarily expressed by the female characters. Katrin makes an impassioned plea for Derzhavin to stay, saying that she will "die of despair" if he leaves her (p. 25). His mother is similarly distraught when she bids him farewell as he sets off for Samara. We read: "Her knees gave way beneath her, she pressed her face to the cold, uncovered sheepskin coat, and suddenly she started to tremble with unconcealed feminine sobs" (p. 53). The wives of Diupin and Khalevin are likewise grief-stricken at being parted from their husbands and yield to uncontrollable weeping (pp. 91, 195). The only tenderness expressed by Derzhavin, in contrast, is the clumsy kiss that he plants timidly on his mother's lips before he leaves (p. 53). Giving vent in the novel to the tender emotions which the men suppress, the women can

be seen as representing the lyrical side of Derzhavin's personality which he tries to ignore.

The contrast between feminine emotion and masculine reason is reaffirmed through the role which intuition plays in the work. The female characters respond positively to their visceral reactions. For example, Fekla Andreevna, Derzhavin's mother, instinctively knows when something is wrong with her son (p. 164), and Diupin's wife likewise knows that she will never see her husband again thanks to "some sort of higher female sense" (p. 195). Derzhavin, in contrast, chooses to ignore his instincts, with disastrous consequences. For example, even though he is struck by Iov's air of duplicity when he first meets him (p. 209), he still decides to entrust him with the mission to infiltrate the Pugachev camp. Likewise his decision to march on Iaik is taken in spite of his serious sense of foreboding (pp. 211-12). One error of judgement follows another, and among the allusions to this recurrent weakness of the hero we should perhaps include the various references in the novel to defective sight. Thus the comment that General Bibikov, the man who appoints Derzhavin to the Secret Commission, is not only short-sighted but is also prone to attacks of double vision (pp. 13, 17) raises immediate questions about the wisdom of his judgement, while the futility of the hero's pursuit of military glory is suggested by his admiration in chapter 1 for the marble gladiators in Bibikov's mansion with their "white blind eyes" (p. 18).[22] The soldier who is credited in the execution of his duties with "a penetrating, trained eye" (p. 75) repeatedly reveals himself to be equally "blind".

From these observations, therefore, it can be seen that Dombrovskii repeatedly uses the secondary characters in the novel to develop themes

[22] We are reminded of the eyes of the statues later in the novel by the reference to "the white, indifferent eyes" of the sturgeon which is offered to Arapov on his entry into Samara (p. 120).

which are relevant to the hero's inner conflict. This was to remain a significant feature of his technique as a novelist, and there can be little doubt that it owed much to the influence of a writer whom he clearly recognised as his mentor in the kind of historical novel, based on the life of a major literary figure, that he attempted in *Derzhavin*. This writer was Iurii Tynianov, whose influence on the work was perceived immediately by Gaisha Sharipova, the Moscow journalist who was charged by the editor of *Literaturnyi Kazakhstan* with the task of assessing the novel, and Dombrovskii did not contradict her.[23] The conflict between duty to the State and the desire to write, as Shtokman has noted,[24] is similarly the inner conflict of Griboedov[25] in Tynianov's novel *Smert' Vazir-Mukhtara* (1927), and there too the conflict is externalized in the concerns of the secondary characters. On the one hand we have characters such as the scheming civil servants Rodofinikin and Nessel'rod, who represent Griboedov's preoccupation with State business, while on the other we have characters like Faddei and the actress Katerina Aleksandrovna, who are associated with art. The dramatic bifurcation of Griboedov's personality is reflected in the way in which at the end of the novel, when he is carrying out official business, he is referred to exclusively as *Vazir-Mukhtar*. It is almost as if he has become two people: Griboedov the writer and *Vazir-Mukhtar* the diplomat.

Further parallels may be drawn between Derzhavin and Tynianov's last novel, *Pushkin*. Dombrovskii, using a pseudonym, had written a review of this work at the time he was working on Derzhavin,[26] and Tynianov's influence is immediately apparent in the novel, particularly in its formal and

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[23] *Sobr. soch.*, I, p. 311.

[24] Shtokman, p. 86.

[25] His official title is *Vazir-Mukhtar*, which is Persian for "envoy" or "minister" (Iu. Tynianov, *Smert' Vazir-Mukhtara*, Minsk, 1978).

[26] D. Iur'ev, "Pushkin. Roman Iu. Tynianova", *Literaturnyi Kazakhstan*, 1937, Nos. 7-8.

structural characteristics. Thus just as *Pushkin* begins without any sort of exposition ("The major was niggardly. Sighing, he locked himself in his room and secretly counted his money"),[27] so Dombrovskii dispenses with preliminary introductions: "The general looked out of the window. Outside it was frosty. The fresh wind rocked the streetlamps and tore the hats off the heads of passers-by" (p. 13).[28] Dombrovskii also adopts Tynianov's technique of sub-dividing chapters into "mini-chapters". Thus chapter 1 of *Derzhavin* is divided into ten "mini-chapters", while chapter 1 of *Pushkin* is divided into eight.

There are also significant thematic similarities between the two novels. We note, for example, the prominence given to the theme of spying in Tynianov's work. Martin Piletskii, who is in charge of the Lyceum where Pushkin is studying, encourages pupils to inform on one another and spies on them even when they are at play by hiding behind columns and doors.[29] Pupils also have their letters read and their conversations taken down in a notebook.[30] What gives this theme its particular relevance to *Derzhavin* is the connection that Tynianov establishes between treachery and religion. Since it is revealed that Piletskii is a Jesuit monk,[31] an obvious parallel can be drawn between this corrupt religious figure and the figure of Iov in Dombrovskii's novel.[32]

Also prominent in Tynianov's novel is the idea of equality, which plays such a notable part in changing Derzhavin's attitudes. Thus Speranskii, the

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[27] Iu. Tynianov, *Pushkin*, Minsk, 1979.

[28] Commenting on these opening lines, Dombrovskii said: "For me they were light and melodious, like the lines of a poem. I hummed them to myself and listened to their inner music. This music of the beating of the line has always been very important to me" (*Sobr. soch.*, I, p. 320).

[29] *Pushkin*, pp. 271, 277.

[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 295, 288.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 307.

[32] It might be noted in this connection that the portrait of Iov anticipates that of the corrupt priest Kutorga in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* and that of the repugnant Reverend Cross in *Smuglaia ledi*. Dombrovskii expressed his distrust of religious figures in a letter to Sergei Tkhorzhevskii: "I believe in

minister responsible for setting up the lyceum, is described as wanting children from all social classes to be educated there in an atmosphere of "complete equality".[33] The same concern is displayed by the eponymous hero in the novel Pushkin, who decides to spend his time in exile writing a treatise on the abolition of slavery.[34]

Tynianov's influence on *Derzhavin* is also apparent on the levels of style and characterisation. Dombrovskii commented in this connection:

> I was struck by the splendid sharpness of Tynianov's style. By the almost scientific sharpness of his style. By his almost scientific precision and clarity. By the simplicity and clarity of his syntax. By the cold impassivity of the authorial voice. And, more than anything else, by the way in which he talked about the simplest everyday things in the most unusual way. In his works everything is at its limit, on its second wind, and the characters really do not act as you expect them to: when they should be happy they are quietly biting their lip; when they should be howling they are laughing. And herein lies their strength. Yes, Tynianov's books are populated with the most unusual and incomprehensible people.[35]

Dombrovskii's adoption of this technique of making ordinary events and people seem extraordinary was also noted by Sharipova. She remarked to him: "The people in your book occasionally act like his [Tynianov's] characters - they shout a lot and - how should I put it? - imply a lot".[36] For evidence of this latter characteristic we need only turn to the indicated episode in Derzhavin in which the hero escorts Khalevin back to his cell,

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God as in a higher law. In that sense I am a deeply devout person. But I do not like priests ..." (see Tkhorzhevskii, p. 200).

[33] *Pushkin*, p. 183.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 525.

[35] *Sobr. soch.*, I, p. 312.

[36] *Ibid.*.

while at the same time hinting at ways in which he might escape. But it is in the use that he makes of striking similes as a means of creating a sense of the unusual that Dombrovskii most obviously resembles Tynianov. In *Pushkin* characters are likened variously to flies, a ball, a rocket and a reed.[37] Dombrovskii likewise uses similes to startle and shock the reader, to make everyday objects appear strange and unsettling. The buttons of a jacket, for example, are likened to hot coals (p. 120); the clock in Derzhavin's room is compared to a child's coffin (p. 121); and the eyebrows of the ataman Cherniai are compared to caterpillars (p. 158).

Tynianov's influence on Derzhavin, therefore, extends to every level of the work. In *Smert' Vazir-Mukhtara* and *Pushkin* he clearly set an example which Dombrovskii sought to emulate. In the course of writing his novel, however, Dombrovskii became convinced that he had failed in this task. He became particularly disenchanted with his use of dialogue in the novel, regarding it as inept. He commented: "It was all right in Tynianov, but it did not work with me" (p. 313). In addition, perhaps he already had the feeling which he expressed in later years that the "scheme" which he had imposed on Derzhavin's life was too rigid and artificial. He wrote: "Now, through the magic crystal of years and experience I see the artificiality of this scheme – as I see the artificiality of schemes or models relating to the lives of anyone of us. A man is always more of a process than a phenomenon" (pp. 303-4). The result was that he failed to complete the work. His intention had been to follow Derzhavin's fortunes through from the debacle at Iaik to his eventual move to St. Petersburg, but he felt that he lacked the skills to finish the task (p. 295). It was an unfortunate judgement which most readers, one feels, would dispute on the evidence of

[37] *Pushkin*, pp. 9, 29, 128, 339. These are just a few examples out of the two hundred or so similes which appear in Tynianov's novel.

the work as it stands. As a first novel, *Derzhavin* is a remarkable achievement. With its taut, dramatic quality, its arresting style, its polished, rhythmic sentences and, above all, the psychological depth of the portrait of its central figure it makes a powerful impact, from which even its incompleteness does not detract. Indeed, the reader is hardly aware that the work is incomplete. Culminating in the collapse of Derzhavin's efforts to win military glory, the narrative has all the coherence of a completed work.

In the context of Dombrovskii's development as a writer the novel merits particular attention for its introduction of themes which were to acquire increasing significance in his later fiction. Particularly noteworthy in this connection is the theme of betrayal, which recurs in the novels *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* and *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*. In both these novels the central characters, Leon Maisonnier and Georgii Zybin respectively, are betrayed by people close to them with tragic results. The theme of equality likewise reappears in *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom*, though in this case the concern is with racial rather than social equality. Maisonnier, a paeleoanthropologist, has possession of a skull that conclusively proves the inferiority of the Teutonic race. Aware of this incriminating piece of evidence, the Nazis finally manage to obtain the skull following Maisonnier's suicide.

Another theme of *Derzhavin* which is echoed in the later fiction is that of justice. Dombrovskii himself was the victim of a flawed legal system, and he frequently exposes corrupt and unfair procedures in his works. Shtokman notes in this connection that one of his favourite quotations, taken from Tacitus, expressed the view that "the downfall of a State begins with the collapse of its laws, its justice. With a man who has been

deprived of his defences you can do anything you please".[38] It was this conviction that probably explains why he raised no objection when *Literaturnyi Kazakhstan* published the extended version of *Derzhavin* under the title *Krushenie imperii*. Commenting on this title, he wrote: "It could be asked, of course, what collapse of the Russian empire is meant by the author of the novel when he is talking about the age of Catherine, but this title expressed for me the main idea of the work" (p. 321). The implication seems to be that he saw the title as alluding appropriately to a collapse of moral values, to the breakdown in the legal system which allowed Derzhavin to torture and interrogate detainees of the Secret Commission on the basis of the flimsiest of evidence. This theme of corrupt legal practices was also to reappear in *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* and *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, the central figures of which are subjected to physical and mental torture.

But undoubtedly the most important link between *Derzhavin* and Dombrovskii's subsequent works is the connection that he establishes between art and conscience. Dombrovskii defined the novel's "main idea" as the "transfigurative power of art, the power of creation over the creator", and, acknowledging in this connection his debt to Pushkin's *Motsart i Sal'eri*, he continues: "In response to Pushkin's question - are genius and villainy compatible? - I intended to reply firmly: no! In no circumstances! The young Derzhavin was ideal for this purpose".[39] The conflict that arises between Derzhavin the poet and Derzhavin the soldier is born precisely of the incompatibility of "genius and villainy". When he starts writing poetry again, he finds himself "transfigured"; he starts to reassess his quest for military glory and deliberately allows Khalevin to escape.

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[38] Shtokman, p. 85.
[39] *Sobr. soch.*, I, p. 302.

Derzhavin's conflict between his conscience and his duty foreshadows the moral dilemmas faced by Maisonnier in *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* and Kornilov and Kutorga in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*. In each case the conflict arises precisely because the characters are forced by totalitarian regimes to make choices. In a letter to Tkhorzhevskii Dombrovskii referred to such conflicts as resulting from "the dualism of the soul". Commenting on the way in which the soul is "chopped in two", he writes: "Herein lies the horror of [totalitarian] regimes - they cut people's souls in half, and each part exists independently. One half belongs to the former, lofty life, while the other belongs to the new, low life".[40] Derzhavin's inner conflict thus anticipates the conflicts that arise in Dombrovskii's later novels, *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* and *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*. In both works totalitarian regimes attempt to impose their new order on the central characters, but both Maisonnier and Zybin resist, preserved by that part of the soul that still belongs to the "former, lofty life".

The significance of *Derzhavin* in relation to the later works is not solely confined to themes. Style plays an important part too. Certain features of Dombrovskii's distinctive style begin to emerge in this debut novel, such as his evocative use of description. In the following passage, for example, he vividly describes the scene that greets Derzhavin as he rides out of Kazan':

> The fresh wind ruffled his hair. The field was deserted as before, and the snow appeared to be dark-blue as a result of the fast-approaching nightfall. Now the colour of the sky was sharply distinguishable from the colour of the wilderness that surrounded him: dirty-grey, turbid, it hung almost above his very head, and it seemed to be so full to the brim with moisture that he felt like wringing it out in his hands like a sponge (p. 58).

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[40] See Tkhorzhevskii, p. 195.

Here we see not only Dombrovskii's striking use of simile, which has already been discussed, but also his effective application of colour. By imbuing small details with colour, he is able to breathe life into his descriptions. Thus, brown foam appears on the back of tired horses (p. 64); the blue glint of bayonets is visible in the night (p. 86); pink sparks fly out of a campfire (p. 58); and yellow feathers adorn the caps of the rebel horsemen (p. 105). This use of colour is not a feature unique to *Derzhavin* but recurs throughout the later works. Most noteworthy in this respect is *Khranitel' drevnostei*, which one critic described as a "carnival-like, vibrant picture painted in bright colours".[41]

The prominence given to colour in Dombrovskii's fiction can be ascribed to the interest he had in art. Over the years he built up a substantial collection of paintings and engravings[42] and the use of colour in his writing clearly bears the influence of pictorial art. Art also appears in a more literal fashion. In *Derzhavin* for instance, rebellious peasants hang stolen paintings on the walls of their huts (p. 117); the eponymous hero sketches a telling self-portrait (p. 131); and a whole scene is devoted to the description of Khalevin's art collection and his malicious destruction of it (pp. 93-7). These early references to art in Dombrovskii's fiction anticipate the prominence it is given in the later novels, most specifically in the two-part novel *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*. Here there are numerous digressions relating to painters and artists of various kinds, from the architect Zenkov to the maverick painter Kalmykov, who appears as a character in the course of the narrative.

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[41] See S. Poremba, "Iurii Dombrovskii. Zametki, vospominaniia, refleksii", *Rusycystyczne studia literaturoznawcze*, vol. 12, 1988, p. 121.

[42] In this collection Dombrovskii claimed to have a genuine Modigliani, given to him by Tolstoi's grandson (see Tsvetkov, p. 117).

Although Dombrovskii was profoundly influenced by pictorial art, he is not a writer solely concerned with the visual, for his descriptions involve sound as well as colour. The importance he attached to what the reader hears as well as sees is revealed in an interview for *Voprosy literatury*. Here he says: "Almost all our literary perceptions relate either to the visual or to the aural. That means that you have to appeal to sight and sound".[43] This interplay between the visual and the aural is precisely what he achieves in his works. In *Derzhavin* for instance sounds pervade the entire narrative. There are references to snow crunching beneath feet (pp. 79, 114, 140); to the noise made by sledge runners and *rozvalni* as they travel over the snow (pp. 79, 89); china cups rattling in a glass cabinet (p. 85); and, of course, references to the "technical" sounds of the torture chamber as bones crack and sinews snap (p. 74), to give but a few examples. This technique of incorporating sounds into descriptive passages becomes a consistent feature of Dombrovskii's later fiction. In particular it is used to poignant effect in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* where Kornilov is haunted by the joyful sounds coming from a nearby children's playground as he is being interrogated.[44]

Another aspect of Dombrovskii's style that emerges in *Derzhavin* is the repetition of certain significant details in order to convey a wider symbolic meaning. This technique can be most clearly illustrated by the repeated image of white eyes in the novel. This image first occurs in the opening chapter as Derzhavin contemplates the marble gladiators in Bibikov's mansion (p. 18). Here the reference to the warriors' "white, blind eyes" immediately hints at the futility of our hero's quest for military glory. There are, however, two subsequent references: the sturgeon that is offered

[43] "Literatura i iazyk", *Voprosy literatury*, 6, 1967, p. 108.
[44] *Sobr. soch*, V, pp. 368, 371.

to the rebel troops when they arrive in Samara has "white, indifferent eyes" (p. 120), while Krechetnikov, the governor who refuses to send his men to help Derzhavin, similarly has "white and round" eyes (p. 203). These two references have no obvious significance of their own, but rather they serve to reinforce the original connotation suggested by the white eyes of the marble statues. Such "unresolved images", as Cathala calls them,[45] are relatively few and far between in *Derzhavin* as compared with the later novels in which they become a hallmark of Dombrovskii's style.

Another way in which *Derzhavin* prefigures the subsequent fiction is in its structure. Although the events of the plot unfold in a chronological fashion, Dombrovskii deliberately disrupts the structure by inserting Khalevin's account of the fall of Samara (pp. 85-121) and the tale of Maksimov's quest for hidden treasure (pp. 153-9). This technique of distorting the narrative's chronology is similarly employed in the later novels. For example, in *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* the prologue and the epilogue are set in the present while the main body of the text is set in the past. In *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* on the other hand, the chronology is distorted by the insertion of frequent digressions on art and history.

As a debut novel, therefore, *Derzhavin* introduces numerous aspects of style that are developed in the subsequent works. The use of distorted chronology, vivid description, "unresolved images" and striking similes are elements that recur throughout Dombrovskii's fiction. The novel also clearly anticipates the later fiction with regards to its themes. It is the inner conflict experienced by Derzhavin, however, that has the most significance for the subsequent fiction, as it anticipates the conflicts faced by Dombrovskii's other heroes: Zybin, Shakespeare and Leon Maisonnier.

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[45] Cathala, p. 436.

Chapter 3. *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom*

Dombrovskii started work on his second novel, *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom,* in 1943, yet it was sixteen years before it finally appeared in print. There are several reasons for this long delay, the most significant being the amount of time that Dombrovskii spent in detention during this period. In 1939 he was arrested and sent to the notorious prison camp at Kolyma, from where he was released four years later on the grounds of ill-health. By 1943, therefore, he was back in Alma-Ata, bedridden and exhausted after his ordeal, and it was while he was in hospital recuperating that he began writing *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom.* The conditions under which he wrote were remarkable. He describes them as follows:

> I began to write the novel in the autumn of '43, lying in a hospital bed with a single exercise book, which a doctor had given me, and a pen – not even a pen as such, but a splint with a feather fastened to it. I made the ink out of manganese – it came out brown and reminded me of the ink used by monks and scriveners in the sixteenth-century. Using the paper sparingly I wrote using such small writing and put the letters and lines so closely together that now I can only read my manuscript with the aid of a powerful magnifying glass.
>
> My legs were paralysed, and to begin with I had to write lying down and later sitting up. And then a cardboard screen, which had different sized marks on it and was used by the doctors in the hospital for testing eyesight, came to my rescue ...
>
> I wrote my novel to save myself from my own debility and depression – I couldn't even move around the bed, I could only fidget (p. 451).[1]

[1] Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent references to Dombrovskii's works in this chapter are to volume II of *Sobr. soch.*, and page numbers are entered in the text.

Dombrovskii managed to complete two parts of the novel in hospital, by which time his health had improved sufficiently for him to be discharged. He continued to write in between teaching, editing and translating, and by 1947 the novel was complete.[2] Unfortunately at this time the Zhdanovist wave of repression was starting to sweep the country, and Dombrovskii found himself under fire in the press. Matters came to a head in 1949 when he was again arrested and the authorities seized the manuscript of *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* to use in evidence against him. One of the more outlandish accusations made was that the foreign names of the characters in the work were coded names of interrogators whom Dombrovskii had encountered.[3] The penalty that he paid for his "antipatriotism, cosmopolitanism and defeatism"[4] was six years' imprisonment at Taishet in the East. When he was finally released in 1955 the manuscript was returned to him in the unexpected manner described in chapter 1. He added a prologue and an epilogue, and under the title *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* the work was finally published in 1959 by *Sovietskii pisatel'* in an edition of thirteen thousand copies. It was never subsequently reprinted in Russia during the author's lifetime.[5]

The novel is set in an unnamed European country, and its action begins in the Prologue in the year 1955. Hans Maisonnier, the son of a famous palaeoanthropologist, is working as a legal correspondent for a major newspaper when he has a chance encounter with a former Gestapo officer

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[2] A colleague recalls that by this time the manuscript had been read and discussed by Dombrovskii's circle of friends (Zhovtis, p. 172).

[3] See P. Kosenko, "O romane i ego avtore", in Iu. Dombrovskii, *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom*, Alma-Ata, 1991, p. 390.

[4] These were the official categories under which he was charged, as he relates in a letter to Sergei Antonov (see *Sobr. soch*, VI, p. 329)

[5] See Kosenko, p. 386. In 1961-2, however, editions of the work were published in Rumania, Bulgaria, Poland and Germany (see *Sobr. soch.*, II, p. 460).

named Gardner. Gardner has just been released from prison after serving a sentence for atrocities committed during the Nazi occupation of the country fifteen years previously, and it is revealed that he was instrumental in bringing about the death of Hans's father Leon. Hans is enraged that Gardner is at liberty again and writes a vehement article in which he reveals the Nazi's unsavoury past and calls for revenge. One of Hans's friends, a Communist sympathizer by the name of Iurii Kryzhevich, warns him that the article will have serious repercussions. This indeed proves to be the case, for three days after its publication Gardner is found murdered. The suspicions of the right-wing press immediately fall on Kryzhevich, but the evidence suggests that Gardner was killed to avert political embarrassment, as he was about to take up a high-ranking post as an investigator of political crimes. Hans is subsequently accused of inciting murder through the press, but before a case can be brought against him he is shot by a mentally disturbed young woman named Suzanna Sabeau, who has evidently been released from confinement for this purpose at the instigation of vindictive right-wing elements in the government.[6] As he recovers in hospital he relates the events culminating in his father's death which had taken place fifteen years earlier, and this account, divided into three Parts, forms the main body of the narrative.

From 1955, therefore, the action now switches to 1940. Hans is twelve years old and is living a peaceful life with his parents Leon and Berta when their world is turned upside down by the arrival of the Nazis. The first officer to pay them a visit is Gardner, and he brings them a letter from Berta's brother, Friedrich Kurzer. Kurzer had previously worked alongside Leon at the International Institute of Palaeoanthropology and Prehistory,

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[6] Although the description of the episode offers no support for this conclusion, it is suggested by Hans's final words in the Epilogue in which he refers to the government as "murderers" and to the "revolvers" which they place in the hands of "children" (p. 448).

but he had been disgraced and dismissed for falsifying a prehistoric skull. Now he is a senior Gestapo officer, and he writes to inform the Maisonniers that he intends staying with them while he is stationed in their town. It soon becomes apparent that Kurzer's aim is to coerce Leon into renouncing his theory that all men share a common ancestry and to force him to support the idea of Aryan supremacy. Pressure is put on Leon from all sides. His colleagues at the Institute are made to sign a document which asserts that all his research is based on falsified evidence. Some of these colleagues are more compliant than others. Thus Lanet, the present-day editor of the newspaper for which Hans works, does not hesitate to betray Leon in order to save his own skin. In contrast, another colleague, Dr. Hanka, signs the document but then attempts to redress the balance by resisting further demands. As a result he ends up sharing a cell with Karl Voitsik, a prominent member of the Resistance movement, who later kills Kurzer during an interrogation by hitting him over the head with a bronze inkwell and throwing him from a fifth-floor window.

Leon's continued refusal to collaborate with the Nazis leaves him with only one real choice: suicide. Before his death, however, he calls the gardener Kurt to his room in order to entrust him with an important document. Having thus far appeared as a rather mysterious figure, Kurt is now revealed as the leader of the Resistance movement. He is instructed to smuggle the document to the Institute of the Brain in Leningrad, which he succeeds in doing. When the work is published in Russia, however, it shows that Leon had changed his views. Instead of championing the theory of man's basic equality , he now provides evidence that the ancestors of the alleged master race were actually slower to develop than other races.

This evidence is revealed in the episode in which Gardner and Hanka search through Leon's possessions after his death. Among the papers Gardner finally finds what he has been looking for: the ancient skull of a woman which had been dug up in the north of England. The skull, coloured red as a result of the ochre which had been placed in the burial mound, shows the advanced development of this race, especially when compared with the crude features of Heidelburg man who had roamed the lands of Germany at the same time. Gardner makes it clear that the Nazis intend to present the skull of the "Red Lady" as belonging to their own ancestors, thereby proving the superiority of the Aryan race. In an attempt to redeem his past betrayal, Hanka responds by shooting Gardner before turning the gun on himself.

The brief Epilogue takes us back to Hans in hospital. Here he receives two visitors, Lanet and the public prosecutor, and he attacks them both for having forgotten the past. Pronouncing judgement on the events which befell his family and on the characters involved, he pleads for recognition of the justice of his actions and issues a warning as he awaits his trial that with the defeat of the Nazis the danger has not disappeared: the individual still remains at the mercy of the State, threatened, as he is, with the same contempt for justice and truth which had impelled his father to take his own life.

One of the first problems posed by the work concerns the country in which the action takes place. There can be little doubt, as critics have noted,[7] that it is located in Western Europe, and the reader's immediate assumption is that it is occupied France.[8] Thus we note, for example, that

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[7]See, for example, A. Vasilevskii, "Kto ustoial v sei zhizni trudnoi", *Znamia*, 1986, No. 6, p. 231, and I. Mikhailov, "*Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom*", *Neva*, 1960, No. 9, p. 207.

[8] This is the conclusion that James B. Woodward reaches in his article "A Russian Stoic? A Note on the Religious Faith of Jurij Dombrovskij", *Scando-Slavica*, 38, 1992, p. 39.

Hans works for the largest paper of the "departement" (p. 7), that the characters address one another as "monsieur" (pp. 9-10), and that when Gardner enters the Maisonnier household his first words are in French (p. 96). There are also references to the Dreyfus affair (p. 24), to the colonies of Algeria and Morocco (p. 439), and to the country's population as being forty-five million (p. 251). Moreover, when Leon is discharged after working as a ship's doctor on board a Dutch vessel, he decides, we read, to return to his "homeland" to stay with his father, "a former notary of Nantes" (pp. 86-7). It seems puzzling, therefore, that Tsvetkov could even entertain the notion that the setting is Germany.[9] Yet reasons for questioning the French location are certainly provided by the novel, and they are by no means confined to the appearance of German names (for example, Hans, Keller, Wagner and Schweitzer) alongside such French names as Maisonnier, Lanet and Dauphine. They include, for example, Hans's description in the Prologue of a meeting with a former colleague who has risen to the position of "Crown Prosecutor" (p. 59), Lanet's entreaty that he flee his trial and thus save the paper further bad publicity by flying "to Paris" (p. 445), and the reference by Hans in the Epilogue to his "small country" (p. 447). Although this remark is difficult to reconcile with the earlier reference to the country's population, it would clearly seem to disqualify both France and Germany.

To the very end of the work, in fact, the location of the action remains a mystery, and it is finally resolved not by the novel itself but by a later comment by Dombrovskii which is reported by P. Kosenko. He remarked that his aim in the work was to show "that the action of the novel could take place in a country with a mixed population and two languages. Say,

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[9] Tsvetkov, p. 115.

for instance, in Luxembourg or Alsace-Lorraine".[10] Although, however, this answers one question, it immediately, of course, poses another: why? Why did Dombrovskii opt for this indeterminacy of setting? For the answer to *this* question we should perhaps turn to the observation with which Kosenko responds to the statement - namely, that Dombrovskii "understood perfectly well that there was no difference in principle between Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism".[11] In other words, he implies, the setting is left deliberately vague for purposes of generalization, in order, that is, to enable Dombrovskii to generalize the indictment of totalitarianism expressed by the novel and, more precisely, to extend it by allusion to his native land. There can be little doubt that this judgement is correct. Supporting evidence is provided by the veiled references to events taking place in the Soviet Union which recur in the work, as they do in *Derzhavin*. Thus in the Prologue, for example, mention is made of a couple condemned to death in "one of the Great Powers" on suspicion of espionage (p. 8). The allusion to the trials during the period of the Ezhovshchina becomes obvious as the details of the case are given. We read, for instance, that "it was totally clear that the bill of indictment was a vulgar police forgery" (p. 8). Reference is also made to the simplification of the legal system. "They detained, judged and condemned people," Hans recalls, "having reduced the legal proceedings to a maximally simplified form, with no evidence, no witnesses, without, in fact, any trial, on the basis of certain emergency laws relating to State security" (pp. 38-9). As Dombrovskii was later to remind us in his novel *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, Stalin introduced similar measures in the Soviet Union to make it easier to try his opponents and condemn them to death. Images of the

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[10] Kosenko, p. 391.

[11] Ibid..

paranoia that Stalin fostered amongst his people are also evoked by Hans's reference to rumours that "enemies of the nation are here, there and everywhere, they could even be our wives or our friends, people who sit everyday at the same table as us" (p. 38). The same sense of being permanently surrounded by enemies was instilled in the Soviet psyche to such a degree that, as Robert Conquest remarks, many of the denunciations "were made out of fear. If a Russian heard an incautious word and failed to report it, it might be himself who would suffer".[12]

The parallels with the Soviet Union of the thirties are perhaps most evident in the novel's descriptions of scenes of imprisonment and interrogation. I. Zolotusskii comments that the interrogation rooms depicted can easily be visualized "without a trip to Germany",[13] and the similarities between the practices of the Gestapo and the NKVD are made obvious throughout. For example, the Soviet practice of "confrontation" is re-enacted between Hanka and Voitsik, although Hanka resolutely refuses to reveal the latter's identity (p. 312). Similarly, Gardner tries to elicit from him the names of the people who were involved in producing the newspaper *Zakovannaia Evropa* in return for his freedom. Hanka is described as being "ready for anything", but "now they were interrogating him about articles and people about whom he had no idea, and that turned out to be the most frightening thing of all" (p. 302). The allusion is clearly to the Soviet procedure of encouraging detainees to name ever more "enemies of the people" in the course of interrogation.

The main parallel between Nazism and the Stalinist reign of terror, however, is the use of torture. In *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* torture is not described as graphically as in *Derzhavin*, but the forms that it

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[12] R. Conquest, *The Great Terror*, London, 1968, p. 279.

[13] Quoted from Kosenko, p. 390.

takes are clearly indicated when Hanka reflects on the likely penalty for his non-cooperation: "they would start to beat him, break his arms, pour water into his ears and nose and, perhaps, put a bare wire on his body" (p. 304). When Karl Voitsik appears for interrogation he has obviously received this treatment, for his face is covered in "dark stains and bruises" (p. 333). Although we don't actually see the Nazis performing torture, their brutality is emphasized throughout. Gardner shakes Voitsik so violently that his head bangs against the wall (p. 335), and Kurzer later threatens to bury him alive unless he gives them the information they require (p. 340). Such violence and torture had been part of the NKVD's repertoire for years, even before Stalin's official pronouncements on the matter in 1937.[14]

Additional allusions to the practices of the NKVD are Gardner's plan to incarcerate large numbers of detainees in camps (pp. 251-2), which plainly reminds us of the *Gulag* system, and the rubber-stamping of death penalties for innocent men, reminiscent of the Purges, which prompts Kurzer to remark to his secretary Benzing:

> The military tribunal has passed several hundred death sentences on the basis of the emergency laws relating to the protection of the nation, but neither the court, nor the prosecutor, nor, for that matter, I, to whom the sentence came for ratification, can not hide the fact that it can not be considered justified (p. 262).

Such blatant disregard for justice led to thousands being sent to their deaths in the Soviet Union during the 1930s and 40s. Stalin himself signed a great number of death penalties. For the years 1937-8 alone it is estimated that he sanctioned 383 lists, each containing thousands of names.[15] Kurzer thus mirrors what was happening at the very highest

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[14] See Conquest, p. 307.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 259.

level in the Soviet Union, and he also foreshadows Dombrovskii's depiction of Stalin in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, where the Soviet leader is shown signing one of these lists.[16]

It may be assumed that these parallels explain why Dombrovskii does not name the "dwarf" (pp. 119, 131, 258, 260, 353) who directs the Gestapo operations. Presumably referring to Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, the diminutive and crippled Joseph Goebbels, the image is converted by the anonymity into a patent allusion to the director of the NKVD operations, the "bloodthirsty dwarf" Ezhov. At the same time we should note the similarities between the Nazi officers in *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* and their NKVD counterparts in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*. The world of Gardner and Kurzer is characterized by the same fear, insecurity and rivalry that later affect Shtern, Neiman and Tamara Dolidze. Kurzer is particularly sensitive to the cut-throat environment in which he operates. He realises that "in the lupine world in which he lived, you weren't allowed to show your wounds, however insignificant they might be" (p. 270). This is indeed the case, for the Nazis show themselves to be ever eager to exploit each other's weaknesses. For example, the "dwarf" relishes the thought of avenging himself on Gardner for his superciliousness (p. 353), while Gardner, for his part, gathers evidence against Kurzer to undermine his position (p. 297). Kurzer himself is no less ruthless. He also seizes every opportunity to outdo Gardner, and his eagerness to make a fool of the colonel causes him to make the series of mistakes that ultimately result in his death (pp. 343-5).

In the figures of Gardner and Kurzer Nazism presents itself in the novel as a cult of ruthless, uncompromising violence. While the former informs Leon that he usually shoots anyone who offends him on the spot, "like a

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[16] *Sobr. soch.*, V, p. 533.

dog" (p. 125), the latter remarks to Voitsik that he can be completely truthful only to a man whom he can shoot at the end of the conversation (p. 338). Both are described as devoid of pity or conscience (pp. 339, 350), and this is confirmed by the pride with which Gardner announces that he works for "the organ of destruction, intervention and death" (p. 124) and by Kurzer's macabre collection of tattoos, stripped from the bodies of prisoners (pp. 253-8). Overnight Kurzer's room in the Maisonniers' house is transformed into a shrine celebrating violence. Boxing gloves and a Winchester rifle take pride of place on the walls, while a riding crop and hunting knife are on display by the window. Even his cigarette lighter is fashioned in the shape of a revolver (p. 228). He expresses his philosophy succinctly as follows: "If I press my enemy down to the ground with my foot, then he is suppressed physically and morally, and he can in no way feel himself to be the victor. The singular virtue of the fist is that it shapes both body and soul equally" (p. 324). To judge from the reaction of the people of the occupied country to the speech addressed to them by the "dwarf", this faith in the power of the "fist" seems to be justified. They listened, we read, "with earnest attention to his every word" because he represented "that crude, incomprehensible, almost irrational, yet well-organized force which brought death and destruction" (p. 130).

Unlike Kurzer and Gardner, however, this mysterious figure is aware that violence alone is not sufficient to win over a whole country. He appreciates the importance of winning the war "morally, in the minds of the people", reminding his colleagues that "the greatest events are perfected in the brain" (p. 324). He tries to explain to them that "the idea of world subjugation was born not on the field of battle, in the thunder of cannons, in the fire and smoke, but in the peaceful offices of physical, medical, anthropological and chemical laboratories " (p. 259). But his

efforts are in vain. For Kurzer and Gardner the power of propaganda cannot compete with that of brute force. "The law of blood," declares Gardner,"is always higher than the law of ink" (p. 245), and both remain firm in this belief till the end, until, that is, their error is ironically signalled by the causes of their deaths: the written word (Hans's newspaper article) and an inkwell.

The conflict between the sword and the pen reflects the wider conflict that is fought in the novel between violence and reason. It is precisely as faith in the power of reason that resistance to Nazi oppression expresses itself in the persons of Leon and Voitsik. For the Professor the human brain is "the most noble metal of the universe"; it is "the holiest of holies, before which all the inaccessible secrets of nature pale into insignificance" (pp. 78-9), and in the terrifying scene in which Gardner smashes Voitsik's head against a wall it proclaims its superiority to the brutality which challenges it. "Wherever radiant human reason awakens and rises from the darkness," cries the victim,"it will kill you, just as sunlight kills mould" (p. 336). This faith in the ultimate triumph of reason is Dombrovskii's response to the moral weakness of the collaborator Lanet, whose "system of self-justification"[17] rests on the argument that "it is not the one who has the larger brain who is right, but the one who has the heavier club". "With what and how can I fight this ape?" he asks. "He has a club in his hand, and what do I have? A university certificate!" (p. 139). With their unyielding defiance Leon and Hanka proclaim the power of the weapon which Lanet disparages, their steadfast loyalty to those values to which a "university certificate" should testify.

In the light of Leon's inability to take any sort of action, it might appear that he is presented as something less than an exemplary hero, even as "a

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[17] Vasilevskii, p. 231.

weak man".[18] This is certainly how Lanet views him. To his mind Leon's posturing and philosophizing are futile, and he urges him to "accept reality for what it is" (p. 215). The criticism seems justified, for Leon has difficulty in coming to terms with reality at even its most basic level. He sits around, musing about Archimedes and reading Seneca, while Berta is left to cope with the practicalities of moving to the dacha (pp. 75, 102); he is even incapable of opening a jar without her aid (p. 116). Yet this contrast between husband and wife should not be misinterpreted, for Berta's concern with practicalities, like Leon's "weakness", is imbued with distinct moral implications. Thus we observe that, like Lanet, she is prepared to go to any lengths to survive. She holds ashtrays out for Gestapo officers and gives them presents because she believes that to be the way to "salvation" (p. 106). Her concern with practicalities is thus equated with expediency and compromise. "You are my crude, practical mind," Leon tells her in a rare outburst, "my true realisation of what is happening, as that coward Lanet says. You are my compromise with conscience" (p. 104).

Leon refuses to compromise in this way, and he is sustained in his fight by the wisdom of Seneca. The Roman philosopher and dramatist is more than simply Leon's "favourite author" (p. 86); he is, as Vasilevskii remarks, "a spiritual support".[19] The significance of this "support" is confirmed by the recurrence of references to Seneca's works at key moments in the novel. Thus when Hanka is arrested by the Germans, Leon immediately looks to Seneca for spiritual comfort (p. 113) and responds with quotations from the same source to Kurzer's attempts to enlist his support for the theory of Aryan supremacy. Quoting from Seneca's tragedy *Oedipus,* he

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[18] See Anisimov and Emtsev, "Etot khranitel' drevnostei", p. 705.

[19] Vasilevskii, p. 231.

declares: "Let me be silent. What greater freedom can there be than that?" (p. 204).[20] The Nazis, of course, will not let Leon be silent, and this is what ultimately impels him to turn yet again to Seneca's example and to take his own life. After his suicide, Lanet comments: "The Professor turned out to be too consistent a pupil of Seneca" (p. 409), and Leon himself anticipates this outcome in a conversation with Kurzer. He says:

> Seneca opened his veins on the orders of Nero and shed his blood ... Now, when a new Nero has appeared in the world and thousands of my brothers who share my science and my beliefs are shedding their blood, his example is constantly in the forefront of my mind (p. 204).

Another historical figure proves to be a similar inspiration for Karl Voitsik. Voitsik's optimism and resilience in the face of Nazi persecution are gained, we learn, from the example of the Italian Renaissance philosopher and poet Tommaso Campanella. He explains to his cell-mate Hanka how this seventeenth-century writer lost a sixth of his body's flesh through torture at the hands of the Spanish authorities in his native Naples. "But five sixths of that frightful, mutilated flesh", he adds, "continued to live, suffer, fight and dream! And that is the main thing Hanka - to dream! About the city of the sun[21] which will be built after he, Campanella, has been taken down from the noose and thrown into a hole." Inspired by this example, Voitsik is able to withstand the harsh treatment he receives from the Nazis because, as he says, "I know, and know for sure, that the city of the sun will definitely be built, whereas he could only dream about it" (p. 321).

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[20] This line ("Tacere liceat. Nulla libertas minor") is taken from Act III of the play (see *The Ten Tragedies of Seneca,* translated by Watson Bradshaw, London, 1902, p. 296). It is quoted again by Dombrovskii in *Fakul'tet,* in a passage where Zybin muses about all that is happening around him (V, 111).

[21] The allusion here is to Campanella's celebrated treatise *La Citta del Sole: Dialogo Poetico* (*The City of the Sun: A Poetical Dialogue*).

The repeated references to such figures as Seneca and Campanella serve to give the events of the novel that sense of historical perspective which is generally characteristic of Dombrovskii's fiction. As in his later works, he introduces "heroes of antiquity" (p. 75) in order to place the events unfolding in the present in a historical context, in order, that is, to illuminate the present conflict between reason and violence, civilization and Nazism, as merely an act in the timeless historical drama of the struggle between good and evil. A reflection of this view is encountered in Leon's reply when Kurzer describes him as having struggled against the Nazis for twenty years: "Longer, much longer. I have been fighting against you from the very first days of my conscious life, and I am already sixty years old" (p. 197). A similar conversation takes place a little later, this time between Kurzer and Berta. "The battle hasn't even properly developed yet," Kurzer informs his sister, "for racism didn't start with us and it will not end with us" (p. 224). The implication, of course, is that Nazism is merely an expression of the darker side of human nature that has always existed and will continue to thrive. In Kurzer's words, Leon's battle is such that "there can be no end to it" (p. 226), and its unending nature is conveyed by the parallels between ancient and modern that are so frequently drawn in the novel, not only by the parallels between Leon and Seneca, but also by the parallel implied, for example, in Kurzer's reference to "Arminius of the Teutoburg Forest" (p. 189), the German chieftain who in the reign of Augustus inflicted on the legions of Quintilius Varus one of the most serious defeats ever suffered by Roman arms.[22] When Kurzer

[22] We may assume that the source of this historical allusion was the account of the episode in the *Annals* (Book I, chapters 60-1) of Tacitus, whose implacable hostility to tyranny doubtless goes some way towards explaining why he was Dombrovskii's "favourite writer" (Shtokman, p. 85). Tacitus reports that after his defeat Varus "found death by the suicidal stroke of his own unhappy hand" ("infelici dextera et suo ictu morem invenerit")(P. C. Tacitus, *The Histories, IV-V, The Annals, I-III*, translated by Cliff H. Moore and John Jackson, London, 1943, pp. 348-9). The parallel with events in the "present" is thus extended.

dresses Hans up as this legendary warrior, Leon immediately makes the connection between the ancient past and what is happening in the present. "This," he tells Berta, angrily showing her the suit of armour, "is the uniform of the ancient Teutonic warriors from the time of Tacitus. Now in Nazi Germany, where the cult of the pagan god Thor has been revived, those fools dance around his horned idol" (p. 190). The spectacle of his son attired in this abhorrent "uniform" impels him to declare: "However bad our religion may be, I shall never exchange Christ for Thor" (p. 190). With these words he presents himself as the direct precursor of the hero of *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, in which Christian values are threatened by Stalin's emergence as the "Christ-Kuteikin".[23]

Like *Derzhavin*, therefore, Dombrovskii's second novel bears witness to that concern with the relationship between past, present and future which Shtokman rightly regards as lying at the centre of his thought,[24] and it seems appropriate that this concern with time should be reflected in the words, taken from Seneca, with which Leon takes leave of his son: "We are afraid of death because we think of it as being all in the future, but note: that which is past is also her domain" (p. 362). The significance of these words is not lost on Hans. Fifteen years after his father's death, he steadfastly refuses to forget the past and the Nazi atrocities. While notorious war criminals are being set free and newspapers are exhorting "Let us forget the past!" (p. 38), Hans retains his clear view of the wrongs that were committed during the war, and this, of course, is what prompts him to write the article condemning Gardner with all its consequences. Expressing the theme of the importance of the past, the references to Seneca and Campanella are complemented in the novel by repeated

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[23] See *Sobr. soch*, V, p. 121.

[24] Shtokman, p. 94.

references to Cervantes and Shakespeare, which function likewise as interpolated reminders of a cultural tradition which the Nazis are powerless to destroy. The role of culture as "the cure for despotism",[25] which is so apparent in the subsequent novels, is thus established here. These references also serve, however, to illuminate the action of the novel. Thus the recurrent references to Don Quixote (pp. 195, 205, 444)[26] prompt comparisons between Cervantes's hero and the two main characters of *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom*, Leon and Hans. The charge that Quixote leads against the windmills is reflected in their seemingly futile battles against tyranny and hypocrisy. The numerous quotations from *Hamlet* similarly cast light on the events unfolding in the work.[27] Hans quotes several lines from the play to the public prosecutor as they discuss good and evil, telling him that "in the fatness of these pursy times, virtue itself of vice must pardon beg" (p. 66).[28] He thus takes his cue from Lanet who a few pages earlier, when discussing with him the situation in their country, had claimed that "though this be madness, yet there is method in it" (p. 44)[29] and who later uses a line from the play to justify his inaction ("conscience does make cowards of us all") (p. 140).[30] The evocations of *Hamlet* effected in this manner may be seen as particularly apt in view of the fact that Hans, like Shakespeare's hero, has a father "killed" by an uncle and feels similarly compelled to avenge his murder. An allusion to

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[25] I. Zolotusskii, "Govoriashchaia drevnost'", p. 180.

[26] The potent image of Don Quixote is again used by Dombrovskii in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* (V, pp. 275, 333).

[27] Dombrovskii's passion for Shakespeare is well-documented. At the time he was writing *Obez'iana* he was simultaneously working on his series of short stories on the Bard entitled *Smuglaia ledi* .

[28] William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Oxford, 1988, p. 676 (Act IV, scene 3).

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 666 (Act II, scene 2).

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 670 (Act III, scene 1).

the play is also perhaps encountered in the portrait of Kurt, whose mask of stupidity reminds us of the pretence of madness with which the Prince of Denmark similarly conceals his intentions.[31] By disguising his identity, he is able to exact revenge on the Nazis, who experimented on him in the prototype gas chambers.

This subterfuge is an indication of that element of mystery surrounding Kurt which has already been noted. After an interval of "many years" he suddenly reappears "from somewhere" as the Maisonniers' gardener (p. 76) . He obviously knows his profession well, spending hours clearing weeds and planting new flowers (p. 153), yet there are aspects of his behaviour that seem strangely out of keeping with his role. He writes poetry (p. 232), for example, is an expert at embroidery (p. 143), and is obsessive about cleaning his boots (p. 154). He also has a talent for catching birds, which, as Lanet observes, is a pursuit "not wholly appropriate for a gardener" (p. 248). The sense of mystery is increased by the curious spasms which intermittently affect his face. This "unpleasant peculiarity" (p. 142) strikes at times when it might least be expected. Thus on one occasion Hans observes that although Kurt "seemed troubled" when talking about the garden his cheek was not twitching (p. 155), but when Kurzer's name is mentioned a little later, the twitch starts again (p. 157). We learn later that the cause of these spasms was his experiences as a "guinea pig" in a German laboratory, but the mystery surrounding him still remains unresolved. As Lanet watches Kurt hewing a stake in the garden, he realises at once that "Kurt wasn't simply Kurt, but somebody else" (p. 236). He suspects that he is a Gestapo spy, and at this stage we

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[31] It is worth noting in this connection that Campanella, who has such a profound influence on Voitsik, feigned insanity in an attempt to avoid the death penalty. See Tommaso Campanella, *The City of the Sun: A Poetical Dialogue*, translated with introduction and notes by Daniel J. Donno, London, 1982, pp. 10-11.

are given no evidence to the contrary. Later, however, Lanet changes his mind, concluding that he is Kurzer's secret bodyguard (p. 248), and this turns out to be true, for when the two finally come face to face, it is made clear that Kurt has been commissioned to protect Kurzer (pp. 268-73). Kurt's true role, however, is not revealed until later in the novel. When Leon summons him to his study and hands over his precious document, he clearly regards him, for all the indications thus far provided of his connections with the Nazis, as worthy of complete trust. He reassures the Professor, we read, "in a soldierly voice", "not in the voice of the gardener Kurt, but in his own voice, the voice of a man who remains to live and fight" (p. 370), and the reader is thus prepared for the subsequent revelation that he is, in fact, the leader of the Resistance (p. 383). According to Zlobin, however, there is one final twist in this case of concealed identity. He suggests that Kurt and Iurii Kryzhevich, the Communist activist who appears briefly in the Prologue (pp. 45-6), are one and the same person.[32] It is a plausible suggestion for several reasons, not least because it would explain why Kryzhevich appears and disappears so abruptly in the Prologue (never to appear again in the novel, at least under the same name) and why no explanation is provided of his obviously close relationship with Hans. The relationship that Hans forms with Kurt in the subsequent narrative would, of course, explain it. In addition, it is made clear that Kryzhevich, like Kurt, was a member of the Resistance,[33] is a close associate of Hanka and the Maisonniers' housekeeper Marta (p. 46), and is a prominent Communist. It is true that Kurt's Communist sympathies are never indicated explicitly, but they are certainly implied. Thus we note, for example, the caution with which the underground

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[32] Zlobin, "Oborotni pri svete dnia", *Prostor*, 1960, No. 6, p. 125.

[33] See the reference to his attendance at a conference of veterans of the Resistance (p. 40).

operative and a devout Catholic Keller broaches with him the subject of religion and his care to remind himself that "they are, after all, all atheists" (p. 384). The Communist connection is also reinforced by the fact that Leon's document is delivered not to a Western seat of learning but to the Institute of the Brain in Leningrad. The suggestion, therefore, that Kryzhevich and Kurt are aliases of the same character is convincing. They are, we might conclude, the necessary disguises under which the principle of defiant action presents itself in the novel, complementing the principle of defiant thought represented by Leon. To this extent the two figures who lie at the centre of Hans's tale, his father and Kurt-Kryzhevich, may be viewed as embodying the two halves of a single personality, evidence of which is the endowment of them both not only with the defiant spirit of their creator but also with some of his own more specific attributes - the Christian values and love of Seneca and Tacitus displayed by Leon, and the "gypsy-like appearance" (p. 143) and profound knowledge of flora and fauna[34] that he gives to Kurt.[35]

The conclusion, therefore, to be drawn from this examination of Dombrovskii's second novel is that, like *Derzhavin*, the work anticipates in numerous respects the subsequent development of his art and particularly the themes and character-types of his two-part *chef d'oeuvre Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei.* The portrait of Leon Maisonnier, of course, is especially significant in this respect, for it clearly foreshadows, as indicated, that of the hero of this work, the museum curator Georgii Zybin. Sharing the same professional interest in the past, Zybin similarly resists the demands made on him by a despotic regime. As a

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[34] See the reference by Anisimov and Emtsev to Dombrovskii's "exact knowledge of flowers, herbs, trees, rocks, soils and birds, like that of a naturalist" ("Etot khranitel' drevnostei", p. 700).

[35] See Kosenko's assertion that Kurt is "without doubt an autobiographical figure" (Kosenko, p. 395).

palaeoanthropologist, Leon is likewise a "keeper of antiquities", and it is in the name of the values represented by these antiquities that he, like Zybin, protests against the totalitarianism which threatens to destroy him.[36] In addition, both heroes are the victims of betrayal, the theme of which, developed here in the story of Lanet, is resumed and developed further in the later work in the stories of Kornilov and Kutorga. Even on the more basic level of his private life Leon reminds us of Zybin with the disclosure that before his marriage to Berta he had a secret fiancee, for Zybin too is caught between the competing attractions of two women, his lover Polina and his colleague Klara.[37]

Perhaps less immediately obvious is another notable similarity between the two works - namely, the similar role performed in them by the passages of nature description. The descriptions of the natural world in *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* provide more than simply background colour; they acquire a moral significance as the embodiments of a beauty which cannot be destroyed and which therefore serves the victims of the oppressors as a continuing source of strength and inspiration. A vivid illustration of this role is provided by the scene in which Hanka, on being brought to Gardner's room for interrogation, is struck at once by the bright sunlight and by the sight of a catkin that has been blown in through the window (p. 291). These reminders of a beauty which even the Nazis are powerless to corrupt give him the strength to resist their demands and are directly comparable in this respect to those

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[36] See Woodward, "A Russian Stoic?", p. 39.

[37] These are not the only examples of "eternal triangles" in Dombrovskii's fiction. They recur in *Smuglaia ledi* and the stories *Ledi Makbet* (1974) and *Khrizantemy na podzerkal'nike* (1991).

provided by the "poplar trees" from which Zybin similarly derives strength when he sees them through the window of his interrogation room.[38]

On the stylistic level we observe at once a continuity of development from *Derzhavin*. Thus once more the reader is struck in *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* by the variety and richness of colour. The blue bow on a teddy bear (p. 419), the crisp whiteness of a suit (p. 186), the dusty grey immortelles wreathed around the head of the Madonna (p. 281) - these are but a few examples of the splashes of colour which recur in the work and, like those in the earlier novel, they are complemented by equally potent appeals to our other senses. We hear, for example, the sounds of locomotive horns (p. 291), music (p. 27) and whistling (p. 327), the trilling of birds (p. 328) and the rattling of china (p. 78) and our sense of smell is similarly assailed by the scent of almonds emitted by the fatal liquid drunk by Leon (p. 364), by Benzing's pommade with its scent of geraniums (p. 217), by the smell of cocoa, vanilla and cinnamon which overwhelms Hanka when he is locked in his cell (p. 287), and by the "penetrating, sharp, green scent" which enters Gardner's office from the trees outside (p. 294). By continually engaging our senses in this manner, Dombrovskii once more contrives, as in the passages of nature description, to evoke a world that is at once more real, simple and enduring than the vicious world of conflicting ideologies in which the characters live and suffer. He confronts human folly with the simplest, most precious and immutable aspects of human experience.

Another feature of *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* that reminds us of *Derzhavin* is the vividness and originality of its numerous similes. The difference is that in this later work they are more commonly

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[38] *Sobr. soch*, V, pp. 86, 194, 245, 390. See the references to the poplars as Zybin's "constant companions" in J. B. Woodward, "The 'Cosmic' Vision of Iurii Dombrovskii: his novel *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, *The Modern Language Review*, 1992, No. 4, p. 907.

characterized by an element of the grotesque. Thus the mould on an old armchair is likened to "an eczema rash" (p. 126), Lanet's briefcase becomes a "fat, swollen toad" (p. 20) and a wet rag is compared to a "dead frog" as it drops "with a juicy thud" on to the floor (p. 404). The grotesque is also employed, less surprisingly, in the portraits of the Nazi officers, where the effect is mainly achieved by the device of combining human and animal traits. This is particularly apparent in the portrait of Kurzer, who is repeatedly compared to a lynx. He has "magnificent lynx-like white teeth" (p. 258) and the "pellucid eyes of a lynx" (pp. 331, cf. pp. 176, 199, 205), and he is also likened to "a white lynx swiftly taking cover" when he jumps out of his car (p. 275). In the portrait of the high-ranking Nazi "dwarf" the lynx is replaced by an ape. Thus while his face, for example, is described as "ugly and ape-like" (p. 129), his agility is compared to that of a "nimble marmoset" (p. 130). With this use of the grotesque in the portraits of the novel's negative characters Dombrovskii once more initiates a development that will culminate in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei.* Finally, we should note the recurrence in *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* of that other significant feature of Dombrovskii's style which has been observed in *Derzhavin* and was to remain permanently characteristic of his art - the use of repeated details to forge connections between disparate events. For example, the moth that flies around the candle as Leon drinks his fatal draught is anticipated by the frequent references to butterflies in the novel. Thus the catkin that Hanka sees on the floor of Gardner's office is likened to a "day-old butterfly" (p. 291), and when he later bumps into Lanet's wife on his way out from the Gestapo headquarters, her eyelashes are described as "two large, timid butterflies" (p. 345). Significantly, the Crown Prosecutor also warns Hans that unless he is careful he will get "burnt, like a moth" (p.

444). Another example of the same kind of linkage is the connection between the reference in the Prologue to a cafe called "Lorelei", in which one German officer shoots another on suspicion of espionage (p. 34), and Kurzer's use of the name, with all its connotations of treachery, in Part II, in reference to the girl who is arrested following the ambush of his car (p. 282). Once more the effect of the "echoes" produced by the repetitions is to give the events a sense of fatefulness, to suggest the presence of an invisible thread tying everything together.

On both a stylistic and thematic level therefore, *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* presents itself, as we have seen, as the bridge which connects his first novel with the major works that followed it. With the switch to the twentieth century the inner conflict of the hero of *Derzhavin* is transferred to Leon Maisonnier, who uses reason to resist the Nazi New Order. In *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* the Soviet New Order will be confronted with the same resistance expressed in the same form - in the form of that cultural heritage of mankind of which Zybin, like Leon, is the "keeper" or "curator" and which is already evoked in *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* by the references and allusions to Seneca, Tacitus, Cervantes, Shakespeare and Campanella. In this early work the future author of *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* already announces himself as "a hunter and explorer of the voices of the past in the present",[39] as a writer who was ultimately driven to write by the conflict between "the transitory nature of the crude forces that oppress us and the imperishable nature of the few things that remain after us".[40]

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[39] See Shtokman, p. 93.

[40] See Gastev, p. 6.

Chapter 4 - Smuglaia ledi

Dombrovskii began writing *Smuglaia ledi*, the first in his cycle of three short stories about Shakespeare, while convalescing in Alma-Ata after his imprisonment in Kolyma. Despite his ill-health, he undertook a vast amount of preparatory reading, aided in this task by his fellow-prisoner Lev Varshavskii, who had difficulty in keeping up with his demands.[1] For the same reasons that explain the delayed publication of *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* (the Zhdanovite repression and Dombrovskii's incarceration at Taishet), almost a quarter of a century elapsed before the story appeared in print.[2] In the interim, while awaiting his rehabilitation, Dombrovskii began work in 1956 on a second story about Shakespeare, entitled "Vtoraia po kachestvu krovat'".[3] A subsequent story, "Korolevskii reskript", completed the cycle, and they were published together by *Sovetskii pisatel'* in 1969 under the combined title *Smuglaia ledi*.[4]

The three stories are very different from each other. "Smuglaia ledi" is concerned with Shakespeare's romantic liaison with Mary Fitton and his involvement in the Earl of Essex's revolt.[5] Set in London in 1601, the story opens with the news that Shakespeare has been asked by two mysterious gentlemen to replace the scheduled play *Romeo and Juliet* with *Richard II*. Together with his colleagues Richard Burbage and William

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[1] See Anisimov and Emtsev, "Proza, stat'i, pis'ma", p. 98.

[2] In 1947 *Kazgoslitizdat* had been planning to publish "two novellas" about Shakespeare written by Dombrovskii, but nothing came of it (see P. Doyle, "Iurii Dombrovskii's Exile in Alma-Ata", *Slavonica*, 1995-6, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 81). Dombrovskii's widow has indicated that these novellas were the story "Smuglaia ledi" and the piece which is now known as the "unpublished chapters of the book" (see *Sobr. soch.*, VI, pp. 365-6).

[3] See his letter of 7 May 1956 to A. Varpakhovskii (*Sobr. soch.*, VI, p. 371).

[4] The "unpublished chapters" were not published at this time and only appeared in print in 1991 (Iu. Dombrovskii, "Smuglaia ledi: Neizdannye glavy knigi", *Kontinent*, No. 67, 1991, pp. 7-36).

[5] The background to this revolt is examined in the two "unpublished chapters", entitled "Koroleva" and "Graf Esseks". See Iu. Dombrovskii, *Sobr. soch.*, III, pp. 252-276.

Chettle, Shakespeare is disturbed by the request, as he realises the political danger of staging a play based on "the overthrow of a legitimate monarch" (p. 121).[6] Nevertheless, he feels obliged to comply, as the two men produce a count's signet ring as evidence that the request has come from on high. Mary, who is aware of the impending revolt, dresses up as a man in order to warn Burbage, her new lover, to avoid the theatre the next day when the play is due to be staged, and she sends the Earl of Pembroke with the same warning to her former lover Shakespeare. As she watches the crowds following the Earl of Essex the next day, however, she is horrified to see Shakespeare among them. When the revolt is thwarted and the traitors surrender, she anxiously awaits news of his fate. The uncertainty continues until a knock at the door of her room in the Falcon Inn is followed by Shakespeare's voice announcing Burbage's password "Richard II". She admits him, and in her relief she realises the depth of her love for him. But in the course of their subsequent conversation and love-making, she sees once more, as she had on past occasions, that her love is not enough for him, that his thoughts are elsewhere, that he is gripped by a more powerful feeling. This perception is soon confirmed. We read:

> Suddenly a tremor seemed to run obliquely through his body, and he sensed the hair stirring on his head. He suddenly wanted to leave this dampness, the semi-darkness, the dirty, crumpled bed and go to his room, to his paper, books and pen. There was evidently something that he had extracted from this pitiful revolt, from Pembroke's conversation about his mistress, from this last meeting in the garret. To write! To write! To write again! It seemed that he had no stronger desire in his life (p. 152).

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[6] Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent references to Dombrovskii's works in this chapter are to volume III of *Sobr. soch.*, and page numbers are entered in the text.

Leaving Mary asleep, he slips out of the tavern into the moonlit London streets, "weary, tired, yet filled with self-assurance" and impatient to be rejoined with "his desk, his ink and his paper" (p. 153).

In the second story, "Vtoraia po kachestvu krovat'", Shakespeare appears as a forty-eight year old man who is returning home to Stratford after the destruction of his theatre in London by fire.[7] The opening chapter, however, is dominated by the figure of his wife Anne, who is seeking the advice of the local vicar, the Reverend Cross, to help her cope with the mixed emotions she feels about this homecoming. Shakespeare himself reappears in chapter 2. He stops at the Golden Crown tavern in Oxford *en route* to Stratford in order to pay a visit to the landlord James Davenant (nicknamed Wolf) and, more importantly, his wife Jane, with whom he has been having an affair. When he arrives, however, only James is at home, and as they are chatting Shakespeare has an attack of the illness that has been plaguing him. While he is still recovering from this attack Jane returns, and she announces to him that they can no longer go on seeing each other, as her husband knows all about their liaison. The story thus concludes with Shakespeare severing another link with his past. All that now remains is for him to return to Stratford to his "ugly old wife" (p.187) and his two hostile daughters.

The final story, "Korolevskii reskript", begins fifty years after Shakespeare's death. Simmonds Grow, a doctor who helped tend the Bard during his last days, receives a letter from a former teacher who is writing a book about Charles I. His research has taken him back to Charles's father, James I, with whom Shakespeare had had an audience, and the author is anxious to know what transpired during this meeting. He

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[7] The Globe was destroyed by fire in June 1613, at which time Shakespeare was, in fact, forty nine and not forty eight as Dombrovskii makes him (*Sobr. soch.*, III, p. 176).

is also interested in the contents of a letter from the king which was said to have been in Shakespeare's possession. The request for information about Shakespeare stirs Grow's memory, and the events of fifty years ago are related in flashback. Working as an assistant to Dr. Hall, Shakespeare's physician and son-in-law, Grow experiences at first hand the unpleasant atmosphere in the Shakespeare home. As the head of the household lies dying, his family's thoughts are occupied solely with his will. Indeed, Anne, her two daughters and her sister-in-law have even taken to bribing the notary in the hope that he will reveal in advance what bequests have been made (p. 212). The invalid, meanwhile, is busy preparing himself for death. He entrusts the chest containing all his works to his good friend Burbage, who is prompted to ask whether the letter from the king is among these manuscripts. Shakespeare informs him that there was no letter, only a note indicating the date and time he was to appear before the king. He subsequently relates to Burbage, Grow and his nephew William Hart exactly what the monarch said to him in the course of this audience. In the final paragraphs the narrative present is restored. Grow writes a letter to the scholar and includes in it the information that Shakespeare left his wife his "second best bed", and the story concludes with a brief Epilogue in which the precise wording of this enigmatic bequest is followed by the quoted reactions to it of five commentators.

As in *Derzhavin*, therefore, Dombrovskii again takes an artist from the past as his subject in this cycle of tales, and once more he places the emphasis on the life of the man as distinct from the artist and his creations. The image of Shakespeare that emerges is not the traditional one of the great Bard, but rather that of a "simple, hard-working, tireless, humble

toiler"[8] who is beset with problems in his personal life. In presenting this image Dombrovskii revealed that he had been greatly influenced by the observations of the Leningrad sculptor I. Itkind who was commissioned shortly after the end of the Second World War to create a bust of Shakespeare for the Theatre of Drama in Alma-Ata.[9] Even so, the image remains a highly personal or subjective one, as Dombrovskii conceded. Citing the well-known studies by Briusov and Kornei Chukovskii entitled respectively *My Pushkin* and *My Whitman*, he says that his stories are likewise about "my Shakespeare". "By 'my'", he explains, "is meant Pushkin, Whitman and Shakespeare in this or that individual creative reading and interpretation. It is how I understand and accept a certain writer, what it is that I love about him and how I think about him."[10] Nevertheless, Dombrovskii took great pains to ensure that the work was based on historical fact. Jean Cathala's comment that "the novelist has never killed the historian in Dombrovskii"[11] is certainly borne out in *Smuglaia ledi*. By the time that he had completed the stories Dombrovskii claimed to have read everything of significance written on Shakespeare in five languages,[12] and the authenticity of his depiction of Elizabethan England was praised by English Shakespearian scholars.[13]

The combination of historical fact and subjective viewpoint in the stories owes much, as in *Derzhavin*, to the example of Iurii Tynianov. Indeed, Dombrovskii acknowledged Tynianov's influence on the approach which

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[8] See Iu. Dombrovskii, "Retlendbekonsoutgemptonshekspir (O mife, antimife i biograficheskoi gipoteze)", in *Sobr. soch.*, III, p. 290. The "Rutlandbaconsouthamptonshakespeare" of the title is a fictional creation thought up by Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Ulysses* (see James Joyce, *Ulysses*, London, 1992, p. 267). This article is hereafter referred to as "Retlend".

[9] Ibid., pp. 281-2.

[10] Iu. Dombrovskii, "Ital'iantsam o Shekspire - Glavnye problemy ego zhizni", *Sobr. soch.*, III, p. 289.

[11] Cathala, p. 439.

[12] See "Ital'iantsam o Shekspire - Glavnye problemy ego zhizni", p. 297.

[13] See Tsvetkov, p. 118.

he adopted to his subject, citing particularly his statement: "I begin where the document ends". He continued:

> I understood that the document should be the starting point for a story but that it should be omitted from the narrative itself. True creation lies beyond it. Just as an actor is unable to act out a play if the subtext is unclear to him, so a document will reveal nothing to a writer or historian if he does not understand what is concealed behind its lines and the forces whose play it reflects. On the other hand, the representative power of a document that has been correctly read and interpreted - be it a police report, a love letter, or a portrait - is immense. Its authenticity, its synchronic quality, its form (it is, after all, a fragment of time that has come down to us), its clarity, incorruptibility and independence, that is to say, its freedom from all subsequent dissections and interpretations, give it that singular trustworthiness which a true artist has no right to disregard. Only you have to be able to see what lies behind it.[14]

The particular facts of Shakespeare's biography which Dombrovskii chooses to look "behind" are selected with the aim of portraying him as an ordinary man subject to all the foibles, passions, pain and disappointments by which ordinary men are afflicted. Central to this portrayal is his marriage to Anne Hathaway. We know that when Shakespeare married Anne in 1582 she was eight years his senior and already pregnant, and it is on the basis of these sparse facts that Dombrovskii dramatizes the unhappy nature of this union. William's regret at marrying Anne is clearly conveyed as he lies in bed in the Golden Crown while recovering from his attack of illness. "Lord, I know I have sinned," he thinks to himself, "but, to be honest, the root of all my sins is my marriage. Everything that is wrong in my life, everything that is shallow, has come from this" (p. 172).

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[14] "Retlend", p. 280.

His contempt for his wife is unequivocally expressed by his description of her as "an ugly, coarse, broad-shouldered woman - like a miller dressed up in women's clothing" (p. 172). Other events of Shakespeare's life are similarly examined to illuminate the human emotions behind the facade of the great writer. The grief that he feels at losing his son is conveyed by the statement that he had no children, "only the grave of a son" (p. 172), while the account of his romance with Jane Davenant, which likewise has a factual basis, demonstrates his capacity for love. He tells Jane that she is his "last and greatest love" (p. 184), and he pays tribute to the role that she has played in his life. "Without your love it would have been very hard for me," he says, "and I even doubt if I could have endured these last few years" (p. 188).

The emphasis, therefore, is consistently on Shakespeare's personal, rather than professional, life. At no point in the narrative do we see him in the process of writing. Since Dombrovskii believed, however, that "the whole of Shakespeare's life can be traced through his books",[15] direct and indirect references to his "books" are scattered throughout the stories. Thus when Shakespeare, for example, leaves Mary after the revolt in "Smuglaia ledi", he is accompanied by a new product of his imagination:

> He walked though the streets of London, green from the moonlight, weary, tired, yet filled with self-assurance. He hurried as quickly as he could to get to his desk, his ink and his paper.
>
> And almost in step with him and keeping up with him walked his new companion, born today during the revolt, the Danish prince, Hamlet (p. 153).

The reference to Anne as a "tamed shrew" (p. 157) likewise calls to mind Shakespeare's play on this theme, while the description of her and her two

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[15] Ibid., p. 287.

daughters as "three village witches" (p. 172) conjures up images from *Macbeth*. The play, however, which is uppermost in our minds as we read the second and third stories is *King Lear*, for the images of Goneril and Regan are powerfully evoked by the undisguised hatred for their father of Shakespeare's daughters Suzanna and Judith. Judith, we read, "could not stand her father" (p. 158), while Suzanna derides his claim to have bought the large house at New Place for his growing family, insisting that he simply wanted "more space for his boozing" (p. 160). Together with the conclusion of "Smuglaia ledi", cited above, the negative portrayal of Suzanna and Judith may be taken as Dombrovskii's response to the view expressed in the first of the two epigraphs of the opening story that "only a fool can regard the Stratford Shakespeare as the author of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*" (p. 103). In the second and third stories it is precisely as "poor, unhappy Lear", as Shtokman has remarked, that Shakespeare is presented to us.[16]

The "presence" of the plays, therefore, is felt keenly in all three stories, reflecting Dombrovskii's aim of showing the influence of Shakespeare's life on his art. This aim is also reflected in the second epigraph. A quotation from Leonid Andreev, it obliquely challenges the notion expressed in the first epigraph by ridiculing the idea that Gulliver was a purely fictional character (p. 103). The implication is that all fictional characters have their basis in reality, since art is merely a distillation and universalization of the experiences of the artist. For Dombrovskii this is particularly true of Shakespeare's art. He writes:

> The most important thing that he [Shakespeare] left us was around forty weighty works, and each of them could only have been written by a man with his biography. Trying to get to grips with these works, we recognise how the years

[16] See Shtokman, p. 107.

> changed the author, how, from being passionate and hasty in his youth, he grew up, matured, grew wiser; we recognise how enthusiasm gave way to middle-age, disappointment and cautiousness, and how, towards the end, everything gave way to a frightening weariness.[17]

Dombrovskii acknowledged that his thinking on this subject was influenced by the debate on Shakespeare that takes place in Joyce's *Ulysses*, in which the connection between the Bard's life and his works is discussed by Stephen Dedalus and his friends. Mr. Best declares that *Hamlet* is like "a kind of private paper", while John Eglinton tells the assembled company that "if you want to shake my belief that Shakespeare is Hamlet, you have a stern task before you".[18] For his part Stephen Dedalus, the central character and Joyce's *alter ego,* claims that Shakespeare "drew Shylock out of his own long pocket. The son of a maltjobber and moneylender he was himself a cornjobber and moneylender with ten tods of corn hoarded in the famine riots".[19]

Dombrovskii's concern with the connection between Shakespeare's life and art is most obviously confirmed by the quotations from the plays which he occasionally inserts into his biographical narratives. Thus James Davenant, for example, quotes from *Hamlet* ("in the fatness of these pursy times, virtue itself of vice must pardon beg" (p. 179)[20]), while Shakespeare's defiance in the face of death puts Burbage in mind of the words from *Othello* "the robbed that smiles steals something from the thief" (p. 211).[21] But the connection is most clearly conveyed by the references and allusions in the stories to the sonnets, the importance of

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[17] "Retlend", p. 287.
[18] *Ulysses*, p. 248.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 262. This and the preceding two quotations are cited by Dombrovskii in his article "Retlend", p. 288.
[20] W. Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, p. 676 (Act Iv, scene 3). This quotation is also cited by Hans Maisonnier in *Obez'iana* (*Sobr. soch.*, II, p. 66).

which, of course, is immediately signalled by the title of the volume. In addition to providing us, in the person of Mary Fitton, with a model for the mysterious "Dark Lady", Dombrovskii also takes up and develops some of the images and themes that he encountered in the sonnets. Thus in the image, for example, of the "master-mistress of my passion" (Sonnet 20)[22] we see perhaps the source of Dombrovskii's tendency in "Smuglaia ledi", especially in the portrait of Mary herself, to blur the boundaries between male and female. On the one hand we are told, for instance, that she frequently disguises herself as a man (pp. 112, 125), that she has a passionate love of "fights", of "violent, bloody events" (p. 138), and that she sits down "in a masculine fashion" (p. 143)[23]; on the other, Pembroke, the father of her stillborn child, insists that "in character she bears little resemblance to a man" (p. 125) and remarks how "typical of a woman" were the arguments with which she tried to persuade him to marry her (p. 129). Conversely, several of the male characters in the story are described in feminine terms. This is particularly apparent in the portrait of Pembroke who, though he hates the queen with "a heavy, fastidious, masculine hatred" (p. 130), is nevertheless attributed with "an almost feminine face" (p. 199). We note also the "feminine gentleness" with which Mary responds to the small, pathetic Earl of Rutland (p. 139) and the aversion to violence which sets Burbage apart from men like Chettle and Shakespeare who relish a good fight (p. 117).

In the second and third stories in the volume we also encounter two themes for which the sonnets might likewise have provided the inspiration - the themes of time and immortality. The preoccupation with "swift-

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[21] *Ibid.*, p. 825 (Act I, scene 3).

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 753.

[23] This "masculine" aspect of Mary's character is similarly suggested by the Queen's referral to her as "my boy" in the "unpublished chapters" of the work (see Iu. Dombrovskii, *Sobr. soch.*, III, pp. 256, 262).

footed time"[24] in the sonnets is reflected in Shakespeare's defiance of the aging process. His assertion in Sonnet 22 that "my glass shall not persuade me I am old"[25] is echoed, for example, in the comment on his youthful appearance by James Davenant, who jokes: "you still don't want to get old!" (p. 169), while another friend chides him for forgetting that they are not twenty any more (p. 236). But time, of course, must ultimately triumph, and as Shakespeare lies on his sick-bed contemplating death, his mortality is signalled by the sound of the ticking clock, reminding us of Sonnet 74 in which he muses that one day his body will be nothing more than "the prey of worms".[26]

In both the sonnets and Dombrovskii's stories, however, the mortality of the artist is contrasted with the immortality of his achievement. This contrast receives its clearest expression in "Korolevskii reskript", in the reading given at Shakespeare's birthday party by William Hart, his sixteen-year-old nephew and himself a budding poet. William declares:

> Life is not only short, but meaningless, - only art is eternal. Immortality belongs only to poets ... 'The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself, yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve, and, like this insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded with a sleep.' This is what the great Prospero said! Today, therefore, let us praise great art, which is permanent, everlasting and immortal, and those creators who serve it and themselves partake of eternal life (pp. 217-8).

The echo of the sonnets in this passage, most notably of the famous lines from Sonnet 55 ("Not marble nor the gilded monuments/ Of princes shall

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[24] *Ibid.*, Sonnet 19, p. 753. See also the references to time in sonnets 12, 15, 16, 55, 60, 77, 115, 126.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 753.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 760. The idea of mortality recurs in sonnets 71 ("Give warning to the world that I am fled/ From this vile world with vilest worms to dwell"), 81 ("when I in earth am rotten"), and 107.

outlive this powerful rhyme"),[27] is amplified by the choice of William Hart as speaker. Although William is not a significant character in himself, the fact that his initials match those which appear in the dedication to the sonnets suggests a possible identity for the enigmatic "Mr W. H.".[28] However that may be, the idea of the eternity of art expressed by William's reading resounds throughout Dombrovskii's volume. In "Korolevskii reskript" it is echoed by Shakespeare himself. He tells Burbage that, although his house and possessions will be carved up by his family after his death, his writings will remain his own. He says:

> There was a house of Shakespeare - it will become the house of Doctor Hall, Suzanna will hide the money, Judith will take the silver, and not even a trace of me will remain in the world! Just a name on a headstone. But, despite everything, the books are mine! Whether they be good or bad, they are mine! *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's! *Lucretia* is Shakespeare's! The sonnets are Shakespeare's! Whatever happens, no one will put another name on them, you understand? They are *mine*! (p. 233).

In *Smuglaia ledi*, therefore, as in *Derzhavin*, the contrast, as well as the connection, between the poet's life and his art again receives significant expression. The central characters of both works are forced to come to terms with their own mortality and to invest their desire for immortality in their art, and in this respect they are essentially at one with the scientist Leon Maisonnier in *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* who confronts death in the knowledge that his discovery will survive him. From the first three of Dombrovskii's major works, therefore, it is already clear that the contrast between the man and his achievement represents one

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[27] *Ibid.*, p. 757.

[28] See *ibid.*, p. 750: "To the only begetter of these ensuing sonnets Mr. W. H. All happiness and that eternity promised by our ever-living poet wisheth the well-wishing adventurer in setting forth."

of the most important unifying themes of his fiction, from which we may infer that they reflect the hopes that he invested in his own art.

An additional link between *Smuglaia ledi* and the two novels which preceded it is the theme of totalitarian oppression, which recurs in this case in the portrayal of James I in "Korolevskii reskript", and once more the allusions to the totalitarian oppressor of the contemporary Soviet Union can scarcely be doubted. Reminding Shakespeare of his position as supreme ruler, James declares: "I am the monarch, milord, the monarch, and *monos* means one and only. The one and only is the perfection of all things. There is only one God in heaven and only one king on earth" (p. 242).[29] With the attempts of James to influence Shakespeare's art the allusions to the Soviet Union under Stalin become unmistakeable. He cautions William against broaching in his writings "that which relates to the secret area of the authority of the one and only [*edinogo*]"; he criticizes him for endowing the witches in *Macbeth* with beards, insisting that he has confused Scottish witches with German; and he ominously concludes by warning him that "if I see any such deviation from the truth in your future works, then I will always take steps to correct them" (p. 243). Dombrovskii's experience of the Soviet censorship is thus translated to seventeenth-century England.

Yet another connection with *Derzhavin* may be observed in the reflections that we encounter in *Smuglaia ledi* of Dombrovskii's hostility to institutionalized religion. Indeed, it is already implicit perhaps in the allusions that have been noted - in the link, that is, which they establish between James, who insists that his power is divinely ordained and that

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[29] The perceived relationship between the monarch and God which is outlined here is anticipated in the unpublished chapter "Koroleva" in a scene where Queen Elizabeth kneels down to pray. As she does so, we are told that "nobody knew better than the queen how to kneel so proudly and regally before God. When the queen prayed then it seemed that God was somehow not quite God and that the queen was not quite a simple genuflector" (*Sobr. soch.*, III, p. 265).

"the most Christian kings can do anything" (p. 243), and the former seminarist Stalin. It is most powerfully expressed, however, by the portrait of the Reverend Cross, the Stratford parish priest, the negative character of which is signalled at once by the simile which likens him to a "polecat" (p. 154) and is swiftly reinforced by the indication that he is more concerned with the quality of his French than with consoling Anne Shakespeare who has turned to him for advice about her husband (p. 155). Regarding her as a "stupid woman" (p. 156) and "simply hating" William (p. 157), he is presented as a man of the cloth whose concern for the external or ceremonial aspects of the faith masks a complete insensitivity to true Christian values. He thus takes his place in Dombrovskii's fiction alongside such other flawed characters as Iov, the holy man in *Derzhavin* and the former priest Kutorga in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei.*

But Dombrovskii's criticism of the Reverend Cross and his dogmatic intolerance of the hero's failings is expressed not only by the negative character of his portrait. It is also expressed by biblical references and allusions which implicitly enter a plea for an attitude to human weakness that is more in keeping with the spirit of the Christian faith. Particularly noteworthy in this regard are the two references in "Korolevskii reskript" to Peter's renunciation of Christ. It is first recalled in the episode in which James Davenant is reminded of it by the sound of a cock crowing and quotes the relevant biblical passage: "And the cock crowed a third time ... and then Peter remembered the words of the Saviour: 'Before the cock has crowed for the third time, you will have renounced me three times'" (p. 206). The second reference occurs when the trunk containing Shakespeare's manuscripts is opened to reveal an engraving of the same biblical episode. Struck by the unusual portrayal of Peter, Simmonds Grow muses: "It may be that Peter is not even grieving. He has simply

clasped his hands on his chest and is thinking, 'Well Lord, what is the meaning of all this, if even I betray you?'"(p. 238). The "meaning", Dombrovskii implies, is that men should not be judged too harshly. He confronts the intolerance of human weakness that he attributes to the Church with this reminder that even the apostle Peter proved incapable of living up to the Christian ideal, and the fundamental importance of this "meaning" in the volume is underscored by repetitions of the central detail of the biblical story which expresses it. In the numerous other references to cockerels in the three tales (pp. 153, 164, 205) we see yet another example of the kind of echoing and emphasizing role which repeated details have been seen to perform in *Derzhavin* and *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom*.

From another sequence of repeated details, however, we may perhaps infer that Dombrovskii was also intent on invoking for the same purpose another biblical example of human weakness. As later in *Khranitel' drevnostei* and *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, the references to "apples" in the three tales are too numerous, one feels, to be coincidental. A rotten apple, for example, is thrown at Richard Burbage during a performance (p. 104); the leader of the procession during Essex's revolt has a face "like a southern apple" (p. 139); Mary Fitton recalls a tender moment when Shakespeare shared an apple with her (p. 144); the yellowish hue of Anne's face is compared to that of "old winter apples" (p. 244); and the Reverend Cross makes his first appearance in the work conferring with the apple-trees in his garden (p. 154). In the light of the two references to Mary as a "black snake" (pp. 115, 132) it does not seem too fanciful to suggest that the allusion in each case may be to Genesis, to the ultimate source of human weakness, the fallen Adam.

Like the two novels which preceded it, therefore, *Smuglaia ledi* provides abundant evidence of the importance of repeated details as an aspect of Dombrovskii's narrative technique. The work is also linked with the two novels by two other features of its style - by the frequency and character of the similes in the work, and by the recurrent references to colour. Comparing his characters to cats (p. 114), foxes (p. 118), jellyfish (p. 139), bears (pp. 157, 169), and fish (p. 235), Dombrovskii again combines human and animal traits to produce the kinds of grotesque effect with which he was later, in *Fakul'tet nenuznykh veshchei*, to evoke the horror of Stalinist Russia. Of the colours which recur two predominate - green, which is the colour worn by Shakespeare, Mary and Dr. Hall (pp. 137, 157, 164) and the colour ascribed to the stars and the moonlight (pp. 133, 152, 231), and yellow, which recurs most frequently in the descriptions of candlelight (pp. 112, 144, 226), but is also the colour, for example, of Anne's eyes (p. 158) and complexion (p. 244). As these examples illustrate, these colours, contrary to normal usage, are used less to brighten than to darken. Their function here is less to make the impact on the reader's senses and to evoke the beauty of the world which has been noted in connection with colour imagery in the earlier novels than to contribute to the atmosphere of gloom which envelops Shakespeare in the concluding days of his life. As added confirmation of this role, yellow and green are the colour of two of the four humours which are discussed in relation to Shakespeare's illness (p. 224) and the volume of Hippocrates that the patient subsequently reads in order to find out more about the imbalance of his humours is bound in a yellow binding (p. 224). These colours complement the assault on another of our senses conducted by such details as the smell of juniper berries being burnt to disguise the smell of an overturned barrel of slops (p. 106), the odour of beans, rancid butter

and pickles which greets the patrons of the Falcon Inn (p. 112), and "the cloying smell of illness" (p. 199) and "the smell of death" (p. 232) which pervade Shakespeare's house in "Korolevskii reskript".

A final feature of Dombrovskii's technique in *Smuglaia ledi* which might be added to the list of the work's affinities with the preceding novels is the disruption of chronology at the beginning of "Korolevskii reskript". Whereas the first and second stories follow a broadly chronological sequence of events, tracing Shakespeare's journey from London to Stratford via Oxford, in the third the sequence is resumed only after the reference at the beginning to an occurrence which took place fifty years after the events which the story recounts. This occurrence, as noted, is the receipt by Simmonds Grow of the letter from the former teacher who is writing a book about royal history. In considering Dombrovskii's reasons for again disturbing the chronology in this manner, we must assume that at least one of them was his desire to enhance the authenticity and also the range of his account of Shakespeare's last days. The effect of the letter, as we have seen, is to impel Simmonds Grow to recall the events in which he was involved, and although the narrative continues to be conducted in the third person, the young doctor's eyes and experience are nevertheless the prism through which they are seen. As a concluding judgement on *Smuglaia ledi*, therefore, we may concur with Shtokman and similarly assert that the impression that the volume is "uncharacteristic of Dombrovskii's creative manner" is superficial and false.[30] On the levels of both theme and form the work is inseparably related to the novels which preceded and followed it. Taking once more as his subject an artist from the past, Dombrovskii again deploys his art to proclaim the artist's triumph over the prose of life. He shows how Shakespeare transmuted and

[30] Shtokman, p. 106.

transcended those events of his life which the stories record, those bitter experiences of pain and loss, to create the succession of remarkable plays, and again we can understand the significance of this example for a persecuted Soviet writer like Dombrovskii himself. He wrote of Shakespeare: "Fate and the nature of his profession condemned him to be an author of works that were never printed, and he readily accepted that."[31] Dombrovskii also accepted his fate, deriving from the example of the great English Bard the assurance that the artist will ultimately triumph.

[31] "Retlend", p. 292.

Chapter 5 – *Fakel*

Published in 1974, *Fakel*[1] is a collection of essays about six eminent artists: A. P. Zenkov, N. G. Khludov, I. Ia. Itkind, V. V. Teliakovskii, S. Kalmykov and A. Kasteev. All had close links with Kazakhstan and, with the exception of Zenkov and Khludov, all were personally known to Dombrovskii. Zenkov was an eminent war engineer turned architect, who constructed many buildings in Alma-Ata, most notably its magnificent cathedral. Khludov, one of Zenkov's contemporaries, was an artist who produced many ethnographic drawings as well as painting the icons for the afore-mentioned cathedral. Both Teliakovskii and Kalmykov were outstanding theatre scene-painters, whilst Itkind, who also had close links with the world of theatre, was a sculptor. Finally Kasteev, one of Khludov's proteges, was an expert portrait and landscape painter.

Contrary to expectations, however, not six but seven artists emerge in the course of the essays. The seventh presides over the entire work and reveals much of his own approach to art in examining the six artists mentioned above. Indeed, several of the essays are lifted practically verbatim from the pages of his fiction. Thus, the essays on Zenkov and Khludov appear in *Khranitel' drevnostei*,[2] which was published in *Novyi mir* in 1964, while the episode involving Kalmykov features in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*.[3] Additionally, the account of the sculptor Itkind and his approach to Shakespeare is referred to by Dombrovskii in his article of 1977 *Retlendbekonsoutgemptonshekspir*.[4] And finally, reference is made

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[1] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Fakel,* Alma-Ata, 1974. All references are to this edition and page numbers are hereafter entered in the text.

[2] See *Sobr. soch.*, IV, pp. 7-23; pp. 75-84.

[3] See *Sobr. soch.*, V, pp. 59-79.

[4] Iu. Dombrovskii, "'Retlendbekonsoutgemptonshekspir'. O mife, antimife i biograficheskoi gipoteze", *Voprosy literatury,* 1977, No. 1, pp. 184-96.

in the foreword to *Fakel* to the discovery by the river Kargalinka which plays such a notable part in the plot of *Khranitel drevnostei* and *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* - the discovery of the skull and gold ornaments of the ancient woman who is described in the two-part novel as "the sleeping beauty".

In his foreword to *Fakel* Dombrovskii mentions two books which prompt him to turn his notes on the six artists into a volume of essays (p. 3). He recalls how, leafing through *Iskusstvo Kazakhstana* by Nagim-Bek Nurmukhammedov and *Kazakhskaia khudozhestvennaia galereia im. Shevchenko* by L. Plakhotnaia and I. Kuchis, he suddenly found himself surrounded by "people who I'd met and who I loved, stones and rocks which I'd seen and visited on numerous occasions, and finally things which had passed through my hands" (p. 3). In *Fakel* Dombrovskii consequently recreates this time that he spent in Alma-Ata through his memories of the six artists and the influence of their works.

The essays, however, are much more than just a set of personal memoirs. Dombrovskii uses them to examine the contrast between the temporal limits of life and the timelessness of artistic creation. The juxtaposition of the mortal world of the artist with the immortal world of art receives particular emphasis in the four essays involving the artists who Dombrovskii knew personally: Kalmykov, Itkind, Teliakovskii and Kasteev. In these essays Dombrovskii adopts the pattern of first relating an anecdote which shows what they were like as people and then expressing a posthumous appraisal of their work. Thus the essay on Itkind opens with a recollection of a soiree at the sculptor's house and ends with Dombrovskii's reflections on Itkind's work now that he is dead (p. 59).

His thoughts on any possible memoirs of Itkind that may be in the pipeline serve to emphasize that Itkind's mortal life is over; he will now live on only through his art and other people's words (p. 59).

A similar approach is evident in the essay on Teliakovskii. Dombrovskii first portrays the man, recalling his fastidious attitude to his dress (p. 64) and the devastating effect on him of the deaths of his nanny and his wife (p. 76), and then again concludes with an examination of his work. He calls Teliakovskii a "true artist", saying that everything that inspired him "went far beyond the limits of time and of the poor, meagre space allotted him by life" (p. 79). He thus gives explicit expression to the contrast between the mortal and the immortal which is one of his major preoccupations in both his fictional and non-fictional works.

As these two examples suggest, there is an almost tangible sense of time passing in the essays. The relentless march of time is felt right from the opening pages of *Fakel* when Dombrovskii ruefully laments the passing of his youth. He says that he looked at the pictures of items which had passed through his hands when he was working in the Central Museum of Kazakhstan with a "mixed feeling of joy (a meeting with old acquaintances) and slight sadness" (p. 8). Explaining this feeling, he continues: "Of course, this sadness wasn't for them - they were genuinely immortal - but for myself. The first encounters with them had taken place in my youth, which had now gone" (p. 8). By presenting such artists as Itkind and Teliakovskii as people prior to discussing their art, Dombrovskii thus creates a sense of the artist's mortality as opposed to the immortality of art. It is the technique that he had used on a broader scale in his three stories on Shakespeare entitled *Smuglaia ledi*. The first two stories, "Smuglaia ledi" and "Vtoraia po kachestvu krovat'" portray the Bard as an ordinary human being, plagued by ill health and cursed with a shrewish

wife and carping daughters. But the third story in the sequence, "Korolevskii reskript" is set fifty years after Shakespeare's death, so that he is now seen not as an ailing, unhappy man but rather as the author of works which will live on forever. The message of this third story is expressed succinctly by Shakespeare's nephew, William Hart: "Life is not only short, but also meaningless...only art is eternal. Immortality belongs only to poets".[5]

The same approach is evident in *Fakel* in the essay on the maverick painter Kalmykov. He too is initially presented as a human being rather than simply as an artist. We are introduced to this flamboyant character as he paints in the Zelenyi bazaar in Alma-Ata, and his originality as both man and artist is made apparent to us from the start. Kalmykov, unlike Itkind and Teliakovskii, already has his vision fixed on another time and another world. He refers to himself as "Genius of the first rank of the Earth and the Galaxy" (p. 83) and dresses to impress not his contemporaries but rather "the universe". He asks people to imagine that "millions of eyes are looking from the depths of the universe - what do they see? A sort of boring monotone grey mass which is creeping over the earth, and then suddenly, like a shot, there is a bright splash of colour! That's me going out onto the street" (p. 83).

The universality of the artist's work, as opposed to his personal mortality, is emphasized in the episode involving the mural that Kalmykov does for the museum's "Science and Religion" exhibition. In this creation, he depicts a tractor gliding along an arc that stretches from Palace Square to the stars (p. 90). As Dombrovskii comments to Kalmykov at the time, the painting appears to be devoid of any sense of perspective; it is rather as if everything is taking place at the same time. Kalmykov praises

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[5] *Sobr. soch.*, III, p. 217.

Dombrovskii's perspicacity, confirming that this is precisely the intended effect (p. 91). Kalmykov regards time as existing on one continual plane, which demonstrates his awareness that the significance of his work will exceed his mortal life-span. As Dombrovskii succinctly phrases it in the concluding chapter of *Fakel*, Kalmykov painted "not for his contemporaries but for future generations"(p. 111).

Beneath this conflict between the mortal and immortal runs a parallel clash between the artist and the state. All the essays are concerned with episodes that occurred during Dombrovskii's exile to Alma-Ata, that is to say, while Stalin was still in power. As a consequence, the narrative contains several veiled attacks on the Stalinist attitude to art. Dombrovskii hints at the difficulties experienced by artists at that time in his very first essay about Zenkov. He says that any man who steadfastly holds on to his beliefs in spite of "all the extreme positions that either life or people put him in" is truly a hero (p. 35). In the story about Itkind and his bust of Shakespeare the criticisms of the constricting bureaucracy are voiced in a more open fashion. Dombrovskii relates how he is allowed to keep the bust only for a little while before it is taken away by the authorities. He says ironically: "It was, after all, State property and was on the theatre's books. That means that it was inventoried, noted down in books, registered in a line and a column, in short it was held up somewhere in the offices of the management, and so I never saw it afterwards" (p. 58). Later, in the essay about Kasteev, Dombrovskii levels similar criticism at the art gallery in Alma-Ata. At that time the gallery was not open to the public. The empty halls were instead presided over by a certain Myl'nikov, who "knew everything, went into everything carefully, and who didn't know how to do a thing" (p. 103). Dombrovskii also comments bitterly on the way in

which the works of local artists were largely ignored by the gallery (p. 104).

The tension between State and artist is also conveyed in a more light-hearted manner in the course of the essays. There is humour, for instance, in the museum director's perplexity when he suddenly realises that Kalmykov's mural, prepared for the "Science and Religion" exhibition, contravenes the precepts of Socialist Realism inasmuch as it is not easily accessible to the masses. Dombrovskii remarks: "The director frowned with displeasure. Now he understood: no, it won't get through to the masses. It is too complicated" (p. 92). Earlier, in his introductory chapter entitled *Gontsy*, Dombrovskii challenges this criterion with his assertion that the beauty in the works of such artists as Khludov and Kasteev is not immediately apparent to the onlooker. He says that seeing the beauty in the paintings of these artists is an acquired skill that has to be learnt (p. 16).

For several of the artists portrayed in *Fakel* this art is their escape from the debilitating restrictions imposed by a totalitarian state. One of Teliakovskii's paintings, for instance, is described as being like a "little window on another world" (p. 62). His personal antidote to the grimness of Soviet reality is beauty. Dombrovskii describes how he loved "beautiful people. "Whether they were flying on the back of foamy horses, herding sheep or listening to a song, they were nevertheless beautiful" (p. 73). And the same love is displayed by the flamboyant Kalmykov in the figures of the beautiful women that recur in his paintings. Dombrovskii comments that "it wasn't in Kalmykov's power to depict an ugly female face" (p. 87). Several of Kalmykov's female portraits are described in the essay. One shows a solitary woman, in a state of semi-undress, preparing for a night-time rendezvous, whilst another, entitled *Lunar Jazz*, depicts a

servant girl with the wings of a butterfly (p. 87). Dombrovskii emphasizes the element of escapism in Kalmykov's work when he says wryly that "lunar jazz sessions and cavalier Mots [*Cavalier Mot* being the title of another of Kalmykov's works] were not terribly appropriate for the time" (p. 88). Kalmykov escaped from the grotesqueries of the Stalinist terror by retreating into what Dombrovskii calls his own "very beautiful and unusual" world (p. 94).

One of Dombrovskii's aims in writing *Fakel* is to prove that the strait-jacketing of art by any regime is but a temporary phase, for art itself is immortal. The immortality of art, as opposed to the mortality of both its exponents and its opponents, is demonstrated in the essays by the clear line of development that art is shown to follow. Dombrovskii demonstrates how art develops in an organic and continuous fashion, regardless of the passing away of individual artists. He cites in this connection a design which he first encountered on an ancient dish – a design depicting "broad, patterned, wide-open leaves, sharp and black, like those on a water-lily and a lotus flower" (p. 11). Later, to his astonishment, he sees practically the same leaf design on a contemporary Kazakh rug, and he remarks on this to Teliakovskii, who invokes the analogy of the ancient "couriers" (*gontsy*). He says to Dombrovskii: "A man runs with a torch [*fakel*], he runs and runs, and when he is already dropping from exhaustion, then his torch is seized in the air by another and he in turn runs and runs, and so on and so on!"(p. 12). As Dombrovskii indicates by entitling his first chapter "Gontsy", he considers the six artists in *Fakel* to be "couriers" who carry the Kazakh tradition of art ever further. The significance he attributed to this notion of artists as couriers is evident from his initial intention to call the volume *Gontsy* rather than

Fakel, and it is under this title that the essays appear in his collected works.[6]

All the artists in *Fakel* are shown to be immersed in the culture of Kazakhstan. This extends to Dombrovskii himself, as the ambience of Alma-Ata pervades his two-part novel *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*. As Woodward states, the location of the events of this novel gives it a "distinctive character", adding a "uniquely expressive backdrop of southern exoticism, warmth, and colour to the grim, grey spectacle of mass paranoia".[7] Just as *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* carries a message that transcends its location, however, so the artists in *Fakel* also have a significance that stretches beyond the Kazakh border. The far-reaching significance of the artists' work is hinted at in the course of the discussion of the discovery by the river Kargalinka. Dombrovskii states that, although the experts differ as to the identity of the woman and exactly how she came to be buried under a rock, there no doubt that the find is "one of the best examples of world culture. Its significance is enormous and goes far beyond the boundaries of the history of ancient Semirech'e" (p. 6). Similarly, although Dombrovskii emphasizes the Kazakh connections of the six artists in *Fakel*, he at the same time recognises their universal significance. He frequently mentions the way in which an artist is able to capture a sense of the global in his work. For instance, there is a reference to Kasteev's ability to "outline and embrace a whole part of the globe" in his paintings (p. 106), whilst Zenkov's magnificent cathedral is so spacious and airy that it is as if "part of the globe has been covered with a cupola" (p. 31).

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[6] *Sobr. soch.*, VI, pp. 7-126. See in this connection comments made by the author's widow (*Sobr. soch.*, VI, p. 377).

[7] Woodward, "Cosmic", pp. 896-7.

The artist, however, who most clearly transcends spatial boundaries is Kalmykov. Dombrovskii recalls coming across one of Kalmykov's paintings which depicts the river Alma-Atinka and remembers being distinctly troubled by this normally familiar sight. It is only a week or so later that he finally understands the meaning of the work. He writes:

> Kalmykov had painted the Earth as a whole. A different, as yet uninhabited planet. A receptacle for wild, unbalanced forces. It didn't matter that there were boys there and that they were swimming and sun-bathing - the river had nothing to do with them; it had its own cosmic meaning, its own goal, and it was fulfilling it with the insistency of all inert matter...This was the Alma-Atinka, seen from the haziness of Andromeda (p. 95).

In his essay on Teliakovskii Dombrovskii cites a quotation from Belinskii: "Art is the sensual and direct cognition of truth [*istina*]" (p. 61). All six artists in *Fakel* are concerned with presenting their own version of the truth, although they use different mediums in trying to achieve this. Zenkov and Khludov, for example, attempt to portray their truth through nature, while Itkind, Teliakovskii and Kasteev approach the truth through historical figures. As Dombrovskii later says in his essay on Kasteev, the artist's main goal is to "make the spectator believe in his truth. If this is achieved, then everything has been achieved and the artist has won. And, as we know, winners aren't judged" (p. 100). Dombrovskii's aim in his fiction is also to present his own personal truth, be it through the historical figures of Derzhavin or Shakespeare or through analyzing the despotic regime under which he suffered.

Zenkov and Khludov are the only two non-contemporary artists in the volume. As a result, there are no human portraits in the two essays concerned. As if to fill this hiatus, nature steps in to take their place. This is particularly evident in the first essay on Zenkov. When

Dombrovskii first arrives in Alma-Ata he records his amazement at the wealth of the natural world. He writes: "I saw that the verdure in this town was set out in terraces. The first level was the acacias. Above the acacias were orchards, above the orchards poplars, and above the poplars there were only the hills and the forests on them" (p. 19). It is interesting to note that the higher the flora is on the terraces, the more out of man's control it becomes, graduating from the cultivated acacias to the wild mountain forests. The poplar trees are the link between the utter wilderness of nature in the shape of the hills with their forests and the man-made orchards. The poplar can thus be seen as the intermediary between man and nature, and this is indeed the role it fulfils in acting as the model for Zenkov's famous cathedral. When the terrible earthquake struck Alma-Ata in 1911, the spire of this magnificent edifice merely "bent, like the top of a tall tree" (p. 26), just as the top of a poplar gently sways in a storm whilst the other trees are bent into an arc (p. 20). The poplar thus conspires with man to help him overcome the destructive elements of nature, enabling Zenkov to express his own "truth". As if to underline this complicity with man, Dombrovskii describes the poplar in anthropomorphic terms. He notes in reference to the poplar's "subtle, vague soul" that "it hadn't yet concentrated itself into one point; another few more moments, one more effort, one more burst and perhaps it would break through the rough rings and open its eyes" (p. 10).

The influence of nature is also shown in relation to Nikolai Khludov, the second artist to be discussed in *Fakel*. As Dombrovskii says, although Khludov was initially interested in ethnographic drawings, the beauty of the nature around him inspired him to "abandon his pencil and take up a brush" (p. 41). Dombrovskii comments that this move was not in vain, for Khludov succeeded in conveying not only the beauty of the Kazakh

landscape, but also the "extent of the amazement and delight felt by everyone who finds himself in this unusual region for the first time" (p. 41). Once again nature helps man to present his truth.

The next two essays on Itkind and Teliakovskii are linked by their references to Shakespeare. The Shakespearian theme is immediately introduced in the essay on Itkind by a quotation from *Hamlet* (p. 46) prior to the subsequent anecdote about Itkind's approach to sculpting a bust of the Bard. Dombrovskii relates how Itkind sifts in preparation for the task through a vast amount of material on Shakespeare and finally singles out a portrait depicting Shakespeare as a "poor and simple man" (p. 56). The handsome images of the Bard in bronze and marble are rejected. Dombrovskii is surprised by Itkind's disregard for the usual image of Shakespeare as a "successful, well-groomed man" and his preference for "another Shakespeare, pale, puffy and with an uncertain look" who is ostensibly indifferent to everything (p. 57). He finds it difficult to equate this second image with that of the creator of great tragedies. The bust that Itkind finally produces, however, expresses his own particular truth about Shakespeare. It has "a wide, powerful face, a round prominent forehead, and a smile directed not at people but at space, not at life but at non-existence" (p. 58). The bust thus conveys not only Shakespeare's humanity but also alludes to the immortality that he achieves through his work by depicting him looking beyond the narrow temporal and spatial restrictions of his mortal life.

Shakespeare is again the focal point in the essay on Teliakovskii. Dombrovskii recalls how, in 1947, he approached Teliakovskii to do some illustrations for a planned joint edition of *Derzhavin* and *Smuglaia ledi*. He remembers thinking that the whole project was ridiculous, for *Derzhavin*, when it first appeared in 1939, went virtually unnoticed, while

Smuglaia ledi had yet to be published (p. 66). Nonetheless, he had a very clear vision of how Elizabethan London looked and feared that Teliakovskii, an eminent scene painter, might prove to be one of those artists who "depicted the past like an operatic performance on a big imperial stage" (p. 68). He himself pictured the London of Shakespeare's time as "a damp, dank town" of the kind that he had known in his pre-revolutionary childhood (p. 69). He is relieved, therefore, when he finally sees the illustrations and finds that Teliakovskii has depicted the scenes with an almost shocking brutality. "Everything," he writes, "was painted clearly, distinctly and viciously. The cruelty and beggarly harshness even frightened me" (p. 69). Both Itkind and Teliakovskii, like Dombrovskii himself, discarded the time-honoured idealized images for what they perceived to be the unglamorous truth about Shakespeare and his environment.

In his essay on Kasteev Dombrovskii examines more closely the difficulties involved in depicting such historical figures. Kasteev himself was a respected portrait painter, who painted several portraits of eminent Kazakhs, such as Abai Kunanbaev. Dombrovskii comments on the uneasy balance that has to be struck between the use of historical information and the use of one's own imagination (p. 100). He concludes that the central dilemma for the artist is to convince the spectator to believe in his interpretation of the truth. With regard to Kasteev's painting of Kunanbaev he says: "The science of identification is exact, wise and possesses its own methods and devices, but here it was of no use to me. I believed in this image of Abai" (p. 100).

In conclusion, Dombrovskii's main reason for writing *Fakel* is to demonstrate the immortality of art in contrast to the mortality of the artist. This concern runs throughout his fiction from *Derzhavin* to *Fakul'tet*

nenuzhnykh veshchei, and here it is examined through recollections of six Kazakh artists. As Dombrovskii admits in his conclusion to the work, the six are very different people, who probably wouldn't even have liked each other if they had met (p. 110). The central issue in this case is not, however, the individuals but their art. Zenkov and Khludov, Itkind and Teliakovskii, Kalmykov and Kasteev all act like the *gontsy*, for they carry art forever forward and onward. The corollary of this analogy is that art is an eternal torch or *fakel*, which cannot be snuffed out even by the oppression of the Stalinist regime.

Of his friends Itkind, Teliakovskii and Kasteev, Dombrovskii writes: "Life didn't exactly spoil my three contemporaries or cause them to rejoice - after all, they belonged to that generation which bore the whole weight of history on its shoulders" (p. 110). All three, like Dombrovskii himself, worked under difficult circumstances to produce their art, their own "truth". The need to believe in the immortality of art is particularly important to such artists. Dombrovskii's own anguish can be clearly sensed in his statement that "the most important thing for the artist is to feel that he is not alone or that if he is, then he won't be for long", and to believe that ultimately his work will be "seen, understood and accepted" (p. 110). Unfortunately Dombrovskii did not live to see his *chef d'oeuvre*, *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, published in his native land, but he died after its publication in France, with the consolation of knowing that it would enjoy the immortality of which he speaks in *Fakel*. Since the novel was nearing completion at the time *Fakel* appeared, perhaps we may assume that it was his own fate to which he was alluding when he asks in the essays: "Does the path of a true artist end at any date, even the date of his death?" (p. 17).

Chapter 6 - The short fiction

Dombrovskii wrote only five short stories,[1] and of these only two, "Tsarevna-Lebed'" and "Ledi Makbet", were published during his lifetime.[2] The others appeared in the late eighties and early nineties: "Tol'ko odna smert'" in 1986,[3] "Ruchka, nozhka, ogurechik..." in 1990,[4] and "Khrizantemy na podzerkal'nike" in 1991.[5] Only one date of composition is known - that of "Ruchka, nozhka, ogurechik..." (1977).[6] Otherwise, thanks to Dombrovskii's widow, it is known only that "Tsarevna Lebed'" and "Ledi Makbet" were written "long before" their publication and that he had not published them earlier because he considered them to be "excessively melodramatic".[7] Perhaps this comment might also be taken as explaining his failure to publish the other three stories.

Whether or not the term "melodramatic" is appropriate, the five tales certainly have a dramatic character which represents their most obvious common feature. In all of them the themes of love, guilt and jealousy, familiar from Dombrovskii's earlier fiction, reappear with varying degrees of prominence alongside the central Dombrovskian theme of the relationship and interplay between art and reality, but the stories have a distinctive character deriving principally from the fact that each of them hinges on a single dramatic event and on the traumatic effect that it has on the central character. In four of the tales this event is a violent death: the

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[1] This total excludes "Arest" and "Smert' Lorda Bairona", vignettes of Griboedov and Byron.
[2] "Tsarevna-Lebed'" appeared in the fourth issue of *Sel'skaia molodezh'* in 1973, and "Ledi Makbet" appeared the following year in the first issue of the same journal.
[3] Iu. Dombrovskii, "Tol'ko odna smert'", *Prostor*, 1986, No. 6.
[4] Iu. Dombrovskii, "Ruchka, nozhka, ogurechik ...", *Novyi mir*, 1990, No. 1.
[5] Iu. Dombrovskii, "Khrizantemy na podzerkal'nike", *Nashe nasledie*, vol. 20, 1991, No. 2.
[6] See *Sobr. soch.*, III, p. 100.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 365.

murder of Ivan Kopnev in "Ledi Makbet", the suicide of the young actress Irina in "Khrizantemy na podzerkal'nike", the imagined death of the narrator at the hands of the thugs in "Ruchka, nozhka, ogurechik ..." and the killing of Zhen'ka in "Tol'ko odna smert'". In "Tsarevna-Lebed'" the trauma is instead the rite of passage of a young boy. The significance and interest of the five tales, which will be examined in this order, lie in the experiments which this procedure reflects - experiments which prompt the conclusion that at least one of Dombrovskii's reasons for turning to the concentrated form of the short story was precisely to explore the dramatic potential of the theme which had dominated his fiction thus far.

Set in the Lefortovo military hospital in Moscow, the action of "Ledi Makbet" involves four main characters: Ivan Kopnev, a senior orderly, a bathwoman named Masha, the linen-keeper Mar'ia, and an unnamed junior orderly (and aspiring poet) who is the narrator. The young orderly describes the difficult relationship that has developed between himself and Mar'ia (who, in the course of events, acquires the nickname "Lady Macbeth"). She despises him for his bookish ways, mocks his awkwardness with the opposite sex, and even threatens him physically. She reviles him, however, not only for his intellectualism; she is also driven by jealousy, for she believes him to be helping her former lover Ivan to arrange secret trysts with his new mistress, Masha. The tension between Mar'ia and her three colleagues is finally resolved when Ivan, following a row with Masha, joins his old mistress and some of the hospital guards at an illicit party, where they drink part of a consignment of pure alcohol that has been left alongside one of the storehouses. Ivan returns late to the ward in an inebriated state, bringing with him a half-litre bottle of the spirit as a present for the hero from Mar'ia. Later that night the young man is woken and informed that someone has been shot in the

hospital grounds. On arrival at the scene, he is horrified to learn that the wounded man is Ivan, who has been shot by a guard as he attempted to procure more bottles of spirit. The following day the narrator is walking in Izmailovskii park with a female friend when he bumps into Mar'ia. She casually informs him that Ivan has died and then proceeds to blackmail him into silence about the circumstances of his death by pointing out how the pension rights of Ivan's widow would be affected, should it be revealed that he was drunk on duty. This is the last time the orderly sees Mar'ia, for she subsequently disappears, and suspicions start to arise about her part in the proceedings. The hero is promoted to Ivan's position, and the story concludes with a conversation between him and the guard who killed Ivan. This man is now a psychiatric patient in the hospital, and, as the hero chats with him, it becomes apparent that he mistook Ivan for someone else when he shot him that night. The identity of the intended victim is thus left a mystery, but there is a suggestion that "Lady Macbeth" had arranged for the guard to shoot the hero whom she despised so much.

The central theme of this story is the relationship between life and art as perceived by the young hero of the story. Oppressed by the mundaneness of hospital life and by the sordid peccadillos of his colleagues, he seeks escape in poetry, in the lyrical world of Pasternak and Shakespeare and in that of his own poetry, which has been rejected for publication, he discloses, on the grounds that it is "too cut off from life".[8] In literature he finds the same refuge from grim reality which Professor Maisonnier had found in the thought and art of Seneca and which Zybin in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* is later to find in the relics of ancient civilizations.

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[8] *Sobr. soch.*, III, p. 62. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent references to Dombrovskii's works in this chapter are to this volume and page numbers are entered in the text.

In the end, however, art proves to be more than simply a refuge, for as the story develops the hero gradually becomes aware of the connection between what he reads in his books and what is taking place around him. Much of his change in attitude is brought about by his female companion. Evidently an actress accustomed to playing the part of Lady Macbeth, she alerts him to the feature of Mar'ia which makes her nickname entirely appropriate. She is related to Shakespeare's heroine, she declares, by the criminal nature of the love that she bore for Ivan. "From such a love," she continues, "a man wilts and perishes," and she wonders how she can reproduce such a love in her playing of the part. "If I could succeed in carrying this thought through," she says, "it would be the key to my role. But how can I do this? How can I turn a schismatic into Lady Macbeth?" (p. 78).

By the end of the story, therefore, the worlds of art and reality have merged; in the different, but equally sinister form of Mar'ia, Lady Macbeth has become a reality. The hero himself realises this. He says:

> Suddenly I understood that the time of Shakespeare had arrived for me. It came right up to me. Formerly I had somehow overlooked him. There were no good productions at that time, and reading him I became entangled in the long complicated sentences - endless corridors which can be covered only at a sprint, not step by step - in his splendid monologues with their many degrees and levels, where simile is piled on top of simile, image upon image, so that they often cancel each other out and in his deaths, his murders, and his betrayals. All this seemed to me simply boring and tedious. But now it was as if a misty shroud had been torn apart, and through it I could clearly see - not Lady Macbeth, no, she was something quite different - but the linen-keeper, her teeth, and especially her hands - muscular, long and sunburnt - as she pushed Kopnev's shoulder and said "So remember!" or as she spitefully tore my book away from me (p. 80)

He thus comes to the realization that real art is not "cut off" from life, that it is, in fact, a mirror of life and human nature. Just as the art has illuminated the reality, so the reality has enabled him to understand the art.

The merging of art and reality is reinforced by other similarities between Mar'ia and Shakespeare's heroine. Thus, both characters instigate a murder which is committed at night, and they use similar means to achieve their goal. Lady Macbeth schemes to intoxicate Duncan's guards ("When Duncan is asleep ... his two chamberlains/ Will I with wine and wassail so convince/ That memory, the warder of the brain,/ Shall be a fume"),[9] while Mar'ia likewise hopes to dull the senses of the hero by sending him a bottle of spirit, in the hope of luring him in search of more alcohol (p. 69). We note also how in his portrait of Mar'ia Dombrovskii seems to take his cue from the appeal in which Lady Macbeth, when preparing for her crime, implores the spirits to divest her of her femininity ("unsex me here,/ And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full/ Of direst cruelty").[10] Mar'ia is similarly divested. She speaks in a "masculine voice" (p. 61), her hands are "muscular" (p. 79) with "wide palms" (p. 61), and she has dark whiskers growing on her upper lip (p. 62), perhaps an allusion to Shakespeare's bearded witches. Her masculine appearance is matched by her aggression. She warns the hero that she will kill him for his arrogance (p. 62) and her violent streak is demonstrated when she slaps her rival Masha across the face (p. 68). And it is perhaps as additional allusions to Shakespeare's gory tale and its blood-soaked heroine that we should regard the various references in the tale to the colour red. Introduced as the colour of Mar'ia's perennial headgear is a red headscarf (p. 60) and of the silk Masha uses in her embroidery (p. 61), it duly reappears after the

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[9] See W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (ed. by K. Muir), London, 1992, p. 43.
[10] *Ibid*, p. 30.

shooting of Ivan in the references, for example, to the nurse's "very red lips" (p. 73) and to the red monogram on Ivan's shirt (p. 73). By continually drawing attention to this colour, Dombrovskii reminds the reader of the undercurrent of violence in the story and highlights the significance of its title.

The comparisons with Shakespeare's play also serve to bring into focus the issues of blame and guilt. Thus, while Macbeth and his wife implicate Duncan's guards in his murder, so Mar'ia in Dombrovskii's story tries to pin the blame for Ivan's death on the young hero. She reminds him that he spent time that night alone with Ivan and suggests that it was he who sent him out to fetch more spirit (pp. 75-6). The hero also finds himself blamed by Kopnev's widow for spreading "rumours" that her husband had been drinking on the night that he died (p. 79). The real blame, however, clearly lies with Mar'ia, not only for her instigation of the shooting, but also for the reason indicated by the hero's female companion - for the reason, as she puts it, that "here love itself is a crime". She continues: "There are women like that, you know. For your Masha even unrequited love is a joy, whereas here even mutual love brings only difficulty and villainy" (p. 78). With these words she defines, in effect, the contrast that lies at the heart of the work - the contrast between the two kinds of love which she calls "joyous love" (*liubov'-radost'*) and "criminal love" (*liubov'- prestuplenie*) (p. 78). While Mar'ia's "criminal love" results in the death of her lover, the "joyous love" of Masha and Ivan seems to lift them to a higher plane. The hero himself notes the changes which take place in the two lovers following a night of passion. He notices how Ivan looks rejuvenated and invigorated (p. 67), and shortly afterwards he observes Masha brushing her hair in front of a mirror and remarks to himself: "How love has improved them both!" (p. 67). At this stage both

Ivan and Masha have reached a sort of higher reality that is far removed from their usual life of petty recriminations, and love, like art, is thus seen as another way of transcending the mundaneness of life. But, while love can transcend mundane reality, it cannot easily co-exist with it, as the hero comes to appreciate. As he thinks about Ivan's death and Mar'ia's complicity, a line from Maiakovskii comes into his mind: "Love's boat has been shattered against the life of everyday" (p. 78). This metaphor not only encapsulates the tragedy of "Ledi Makbet"; it also anticipates the tragic collisions of love and reality in the subsequent stories.

In "Khrizantemy na podzerkal'nike"[11] we are presented with another love triangle involving the central character, Nikolai, his lover Nina, and a girl called Irina. The action begins with a telephone call in which Nina, an actress, asks Nikolai to attend a preview of a play in which she's performing. Nikolai declines due to his hectic work schedule, but he later feels guilty and buys a bouquet of pink chrysanthemums to give to her. After work he decides to drop into the "Irtysh restaurant", and it is here that he meets Irina. He recognises her as an actress-friend of Nina's and recalls how she gave a recital two years previously. Irina tells him that it is her birthday, and since the *maitre d'hotel* refuses to admit her by herself, Nikolai allows her to dine with him. In the course of the meal she becomes steadily more drunk and begins revealing details about herself and her unhappy marriage. She also tells him how "passionately" she loves chrysanthemums with the result that he is moved to give her the bouquet purchased for Nina. After the meal he accompanies her to her home where she shows him her photograph albums, provides further details about her private life and, before they spend the night together, asks him to put a nail in the wall for her to hang coats on. The next day he

[11] The title of this work is hereafter abbreviated to "Khrizantemy".

guiltily buys another bunch of chrysanthemums before going to see Nina at the theatre. In the dressing-room Nina starts talking about the director Pechorin, Irina's ex-husband, and reveals that the previous day Irina had got married again, this time to a thirty-year-old engineer. At this point their conversation is interrupted by the entrance of Pechorin, who announces that Irina has hung herself from a nail in the wall. Nikolai is wracked with guilt over his part in the suicide and is haunted by images of Irina. He tries to confide in Nina, but can only bring himself to admit that he'd met Irina the previous night. The story ends with Nina telling him never again to buy her chrysanthemums, because it would always seem to her as if he were coming to her from a dead woman.

The main theme of the story is again the relationship between art and reality, and it is primarily explored through the portrayal of the two female characters. While both are actresses, their attitude to art is very different. Nina is devoted to the theatre, to the extent that she finds it difficult to deal with reality. Irina accuses her of having a "list of roles" rather than a soul,[12] and this accusation seems justified, for even in her private life she seems simply to be putting on an act. This is exemplified when the person closest to her, her lover Nikolai, is unable to tell if she is genuinely sleeping: "Covered by the sheet, Nina lay motionless with closed eyes, and it was impossible to decide whether she was asleep or not" (p. 108). Similarly, when later that same night he gets up and finds her alone in the living room, the scene that she presents is almost stage-managed. She sits in the armchair in a "tiny island of light", smoking a cigarette, and when he comes in she looks at him and "flicks the ash" (p. 108). From this it is

[12] Iu. Dombrovskii, "Khrizantemy na podzerkal'nike", in "Proza, stat'i, pis'ma", *Nashe nasledie*, vol. 20, 1991, No. 2, p. 109. All references are to this edition, and page numbers are entered in the text.

clear to see how Nina's highly developed sense of drama seems to dictate her every move.

Irina's comment, therefore, that Nina finds it "more important to act than to live" (p. 109) is justified by her behaviour in the story. The problem is that she seems to regard art as existing in a vacuum, bearing no relation to reality. As a result, she is unable to deal with life other than through her stage "persona". This explains why her first reaction, when she learns of Irina's suicide, is to turn "quickly" to the mirror to powder beneath her eyes, almost as if she is applying some sort of disguise to hide her from the reality (p. 105). The only time that she momentarily lets her facade slip is when discussing her dead friend with Nikolai. We read: "Nina was agitated and pale, but she spoke slowly and calmly, and before him at that moment stood Irina, as she was when she threw her head back, all the time trying to get a good look in the mirror at the bluish, warmly-pulsating hollow in her neck" (p. 109). This moment of vulnerability, however, is short-lived; she is anxious to get back to bed so as to be refreshed for the first reading at the theatre the next morning (p. 109).

While Nina is preoccupied with her art, Irina is concerned solely with reality. "I am not the same as your Nina," she tells Nikolai, "I need a private life. If that was taken from me, then I would die like a fish" (p. 106). For her, reality is more important than art. "What can I do if I want happiness at home in my flat, and not on the stage alongside props and a curtain?" she asks Nikolai in desperation (p. 109). She realizes that Nina can "get by without happiness" and tells Nikolai, significantly, that if he left Nina, he could be sure that she "wouldn't take to drink, turn grey, or hang herself" (p. 106). In the light of Irina's nonchalant attitude towards her art, it is ironic that she gives such a convincing performance when she asks Nikolai to hammer a nail in the wall on which to hang "coats".

Another important theme in the story, which links it directly to "Ledi Makbet", is that of blame and guilt. Nina, when talking about Irina's death, admits that "we are all guilty before her" (p. 109), and this is particularly true for Nikolai. He is haunted by memories of his night with the dead woman; he imagines her lying in the morgue and is tormented by images of her when she was alive (p. 108). Conversely, Irina's ex-husband, who had caused her so much pain, is the one character who tries to absolve himself of guilt. "Am I to blame that I do not love her?" he asks (p. 108). Dombrovskii responds with a reference to Ostrovskii's play *Bez viny vinovatye*, with an allusion to the moral blindness in this work of the aspiring civil servant Murov, who explains his refusal to marry the down-at-heel mother of his child, and thus endanger his career, by reference to the unsuitability of his upbringing.[13] The allusion conveys the hollowness of Pechorin's self-justifying question, and the parallel between the situations in the two works is strengthened when we learn that the heroine of Ostrovskii's play is an actress called Nina.

The guilt which pervades "Khrizantemy" is symbolically linked with the chrysanthemums of the title. They continually remind Nikolai of Irina and of he part he played in her death. When he learns of her suicide, for instance, his first instinct is to seize the chrysanthemums that are standing on the windowsill in the theatre's dressing-room: "The petals were moist and cold, but he immediately remembered how she had pressed the flowers to her, how she had wept and said 'How strange!'" (p. 108). It is similarly the sight of the vase of flowers which prevents him from confessing to Nina when she asks what is troubling him: "He looked at her, made as if to open his mouth, but saw the chrysanthemums on the little table and remembered how that woman, who was in the morgue, had

[13] Ostrovskii, A.N., *Bez viny vinovatye* in *Sochineniia* (3 vols), Vol. 3, Moscow, 1987, p. 425.

looked so simply and with interest in the mirror at the hollow in her throat, and he begged in a plaintive voice: 'Not now, okay?'"(p. 109). The significance of the flowers is suggested at the beginning of the story when Irina is reminiscing about her mother's old gramophone records. "There were a lot of records," she says, "but most often mother would put on 'I am dying with each day' and then 'And to my grave bring a wreath of chrysanthemums'" (p. 106). As in the D. H. Lawrence story "Odour of Chrysanthemums", therefore, the flowers become a symbol of death.

Another significant theme of "Khrizantemy" is that of love, and again we encounter the two forms of love that are contrasted in "Ledi Makbet". Once more, however, it is "criminal", destructive love that predominates. The most obvious example of it is Irina's irrational passion for her ex-husband. He treats her in an appalling fashion: he flirts with one of her friends at their wedding reception (p. 107), brings his own drunken friends back to their flat on a regular basis (p. 105), and finally tells her that he has found another woman (p. 106). Yet for reasons which she herself does not understand she still loves him. "Why do I love him?" she asks Nikolai. "Why is love so blind?" (p. 106). He replies: "It's the old question - 'why does the young Desdemona love her negro?'. And you know how Pushkin answered it: 'Because there is no law governing the sun,[14] the eagle and the heart of a young girl'" (p. 106). The allusion, to Pushkin's narrative poem "Ezerskii", serves not only to underline the inexplicable nature of love but it also increases the focus on "criminal love"; Desdemona, like Irina, is an innocent victim whose love leads to her death.

These literary allusions in the portrait of the victim are duly paralleled by those which recur in the portrait of her tormentor. They are derived from the source to which his name alludes and which is entirely appropriate, of

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[14] Nikolai misquotes Pushkin here, substituting "sun" (*solntsu*) for "wind" (*vetru*).

course, for a man who feels no remorse for destroying the woman who loves him: the art of Lermontov. The tormentor of Irina receives the name of the tormentor of Bela. Moreover, he is reported to have played the part of the "unknown man" in Lermontov's *Maskarad* and is thus associated with yet another work which charts the course of a destructive love. It is the "unknown man" who reveals to the hero, Arbenin, at the end of the play that the heroine whom the latter has killed for her alleged infidelity was, in fact, entirely innocent. Dombrovskii thus endows his story of "criminal love" with yet another literary reverberation, reinforcing it by giving the name Arbenin to one of the actors in the company.

The central figure of the next story, "Ruchka, nozhka, ogurechik ..."[15] is an unnamed writer who is being threatened by a gang of thugs . In an attempt to put an end to the threats, he arranges to meet his persecutors. He waits patiently on a piece of wasteground next to his home, but the gang fails to turn up for the rendezvous. Although it is by now quite late, the writer decides to catch a train back to his country dacha, where his wife is waiting for him. On the train he meets up with an old acquaintance, the chairman of the regional society of bibliophiles, who invites him to get off with him at his stop in order to have a drink and meet another author who is working on a historical novel. The writer finally agrees, and when they disembark, he is led to an isolated dacha in the middle of a wood. Here they are met not by the aforementioned author, however, but by the group of thugs. A fight ensues during which the writer is beaten to death. This is followed by the revelation that the writer has simply imagined this violent scene and is in fact still sitting on the train talking to the bibliophile. The story ends with the writer arriving at his dacha safely, chiding himself for such wild imaginings.

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[15] The title of this work is abbreviated hereafter to "Ruchka".

Once more the relationship between art and reality is the theme to which these events give dramatic expression. The hero himself makes the connection as he prepares to meet the gang which has been tormenting him. He reaches in a drawer for his Finnish knife when he suddenly realises that events are unfolding along the lines of a script he has written ("just like in my stupid film script!" he exclaims (p. 86)). His consciousness of the link leads him to tell his actress friend that they are going to put on a "performance" for the gang. "Are we about to put on a performance for them," he says to her, "A *Iulian Semenov* in four parts?" (p. 87). The culmination of this interplay between art and reality is, of course, his imagined death at the hands of the thugs. In this case, as we have seen, the worlds of art and reality do not merge; it is only in the film script that the violence is inflicted. Yet the whole point of the story, which relates it directly to "Ledi Makbet", lies precisely in the hero's experience of the violence as if it were a reality, for again it is the view of art as a separate domain, as something that is "cut off" from life, that Dombrovskii is challenging. The "idea" of the story is expressed symbolically by a caricature drawn by the hero's actress friend in which she contrasts him with the devious figure of his editor by representing the latter as a *lekalo* (a draughtsman's instrument for the drawing of curved lines) and him as the cucumber with arms and legs to which the story's title refers (p. 88). The allusion is to the two different views of life reflected in the hero's contrasting reactions to the situation in which he finds himself - the instinctive reaction of the man, who sees it in relatively straightforward terms as entirely under his control and is confident of his ability to emerge from it unscathed, and the reaction of the artist who had envisaged in the film script the more complex and horrific possibilities inherent in such a situation. The story records the gradual erosion of his confidence as the

narrowing of the gap between art and reality induces the fear that the film script may indeed become a reality, and although this fear is ultimately realised only in his imagination, his attitude to life is transformed by the experience. When he emerges from his reverie to discover that he is still alive and still sitting on the train chatting to the bibliophile, he reproaches himself for his cowardice, but he also accepts now that the imagined outcome could easily have been the real outcome, and he acknowledges the truth which the experience has taught him: that the complex, imaginative creations of the artist are not irrelevant to life, that in life, as in art, "nothing moves in straight lines, everything proceeds in a roundabout manner" (p. 99). "An arm, a leg and a cucumber," he says, "if only it were really like that, but it is nothing of the kind." The confusion of life and art has taught him that the appropriate symbol of life is the curved line of the *lekalo*, the "damned *lekalo*" (p. 99).

The hero's "death" at the hands of the thugs is more than a testimony to the vividness of his imagination; it is also a reflection of that all-consuming fear which the *Vozhd'* bred in Soviet society. Thus we observe that when the bibliophile remarks to the hero that the latter's wife doesn't like him, the hero immediately jumps to the conclusion that his telephone has been tapped, for he knows that it is only during a telephone call that his wife has revealed this (p. 92). Nourished by fear, this seed of suspicion develops into the nightmarish reverie which consumes the hero on his train journey. At the beginning of the story he disparages the thugs, regarding them with contempt, but gradually fear takes control, fed by the knowledge that a poet and an artist have recently died in suspicious circumstances (pp. 82, 85). Sensing another State campaign against artists and having already served a period as a *zek*, he becomes convinced that he has now been pinpointed by the State for sterner treatment.

The whole experience causes him to re-evaluate the effects that intimidation has on a person. On waking from his reverie, he remarks to himself that men are all "cowardly creatures" at heart, even old "engineers of human souls" like himself. "Ring us up a couple of times," he continues, "and we will run away from everything. Those vermin know full well what they are doing. There I was, I'd plucked up the courage, gone to see them and returned proud, fearing nothing, only to spend the whole journey thereafter dying of fright" (p. 99). When he looks at the bibliophile now, he sees before him not a scheming murderer, but an "ordinary simple chap, who sincerely loved him". The effect of the fear induced by the gang and, more basically, by the authority which it served had been to make him regard this love as "a deception and trap" (p. 99). It had had the effect which in a letter to Tkhorzhevskii Dombrovskii attributed to totalitarian regimes in general: "They not only kill people, but also make things corrupt. They have lowered the standard of world good".[16]

The subject of the next story, "Tol'ko odna smert'", is the troubled life of a young man called Zhen'ka, as described by one of his neighbours. The starting point of the narrative is Zhen'ka's mysterious death, an event which causes the neighbour to trace back his acquaintance with the deceased. Zhen'ka lives with his wife, Irina, and her parents but this domestic arrangement is not a happy one. There are frequent arguments, and for relief he turns increasingly to drink. The rows consequently multiply and become more violent. On one occasion he kicks down the front door; on another he slashes his wrists and arm. Deaf, however, to these obvious cries for help, Irina and her mother, Nina, respond only with contempt. Although the young couple are finally granted their own flat,

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[16] Tkhorzhevskii, pp. 195-6.

their relationship fails to improve, and Zhen'ka again attempts to commit suicide. Shortly afterwards the couple divorce, and both remarry. Zhen'ka's new marriage, however, is no more successful than his first. Again he turns to drink and gambling. The night of his death he turns up at the communal flat and asks to speak to Irina and his old neighbour. Nina refuses to let him do so, and he is murdered shortly afterwards, killed by several blows from an axe. The subsequent investigation fails to answer any of the questions surrounding the case, and the murder is thus left unsolved.

Although connections with the other three tales discussed are not immediately obvious from this summary of the story's events, it nevertheless presents yet another development of the two themes which have been seen to be combined in all of them. In this context art and reality collide in the sharply contrasting forms of the mythology and culture of antiquity and the sordid, claustrophobic life created in the communal flat by the despotic actions of Irina and her mother. Guarding the keys with all the diligence of a gaoler (p. 23) and restricting visits to other inhabitants (p. 17), they treat the flat, in the narrator's words, as "their citadel, their fortress, their land, their country with a lock" (p. 17), and behind the boundaries of this "country", he declares, normal moral values are remorselessly eroded. "In our appartment," he says,"a complete, unconditional matriarchy reigned. Masculine independence, bravery, honour, even, perhaps, conscience - it all went out of the window" (p. 16). The male characters try to escape from this reality: Zhen'ka turns to drinking and gambling, while the narrator turns to his writing and to the inspiration that feeds it. From the amorality, cynicism and indifference of the Soviet present, symbolised by life in the "citadel", he finds a refuge, like the future hero of *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, in

the values of Graeco-Roman culture and civilization, in the respect for truth reflected in the ancient legal systems (p. 34), and in that faith in justice and the power of conscience which expressed itself in Graeco-Roman art and mythology in the conceptions of the Erinyes and Eumenides (p. 7).

But at the heart of the story lies the second of the two themes which link it with the other three tales - the theme of "criminal love", combined once more with the theme of guilt, which is developed here in the narrator's account of the tempestuous relationship between Zhen'ka and Irina. The disastrous outcome of this relationship is foreshadowed at once by his remark that "nothing good would come of this couple" (p. 11), by the unfortunate circumstances in which the wedding ceremony takes place (conducted hastily between funerals (p. 20)), and by Zhen'ka's drunken behaviour at the reception (p. 12). The extent to which their relationship subsequently deteriorates is most clearly demonstrated by Irina's reaction to his first suicide attempt. When she discovers that he has tried to slit his veins lengthways instead of widthways, she laughs openly at him (p. 22). The reference shortly afterwards to the murder of Desdemona in *Othello* (p. 25) heightens the sense that Zhen'ka, like Irina in "Khrizantemy", is soon to become a victim of "criminal love". Yet the issues in the story are not as clear-cut as the dark portrait of Irina would seem to suggest, for it is made clear that initially she was devoted to Zhen'ka. When the narrator first hears her utter Zhen'ka's name, for instance, he can immediately tell, he says, "from her voice" what this man means to her (p. 9), and we learn that while he was away serving in the army she waited patiently for him (p. 31). Who, then, was to blame for the subsequent tragedy? "Try sorting out here who is right and who is wrong (*vinovat*)", says the narrator (p. 31). In the end he lays the blame less on the two victims of the tragedy

than on those, including himself, who foresaw it and did nothing to prevent it. He blames, in short, the indifference which he sees at the heart of the society of which the communal flat is a microcosm, describing it as a "tragic guilt", as a tragic collapse of that "universal sympathy" or "responsibility of one person for another" which the ancient Greeks understood so well. And the tragedy is deepened, he adds, by the fact that his is the only conscience that feels this guilt, the only one that hears the singing of those Erinyes who "in the *Oresteia* drive the murderer first to madness, and then to the grave". It is they, he discloses, these ancient mythological symbols of his personal sense of guilt, who impel him to write (p. 7).

The final story, "Tsarevna-Lebed'" is a first-person narrative which describes the experiences of an unnamed twelve-year-old boy as he grows up in the country. The story relates how his hitherto tranquil life, devoted chiefly to catching lizards, butterflies and water-beetles, is interrupted by the arrival from Moscow of a beautiful and talented ballerina named Katia. He quickly becomes infatuated with her but, to his dismay and annoyance, he discovers that his uncle, Aleksandr, has started courting her. One evening he chances upon the couple as they embrace in a local wood, and from the conversation which he overhears it is evident that Aleksandr has been trying unavailingly to prevail on Katia to consummate their relationship. The boy is so distressed by the scene that he runs away and hides in a cave for three days. When he emerges, he discovers that Katia is about to leave for Moscow and that she wishes to see him before she goes. He finds her at her dacha, and there she tells him that she saw him spying on them in the wood. She forgives him, however, kisses him and takes her leave of him with an emotional homily on the importance of

women in "all genuine relationships".[17] Many years were to pass, he tells us, before Pushkin's poetry provided him with the words to express the state of "radiant sadness" in which she left him (p. 58).

Again, therefore, love is the main theme of the story, but instead of "criminal love" we are presented here with an experience of "joyous" love. From the moment the boy first sees Katia, he is besotted with her. "It was true love", he confesses (p. 45), and this is reflected in his behaviour. He dreams about her and dedicates poetry to her (p. 45), and the sight of her kissing her dog is enough to bring him out in a sweat (p. 44). It is the first time, he admits, that he'd thought "about a woman and her beauty" (p. 42). And Katia is extremely beautiful. She has blue eyes and white skin, and is always immaculately dressed; even when walking in the countryside she turns out in a delicate dress with complementing jewellery (p. 46). As the embodiment of an exceptional beauty which has the power to inspire instinctive love, she seems to have been conceived, as the numerous references in her portrait to water suggest, as a kind of Aphrodite figure. Thus the young hero first meets her by the pond in which he usually catches water-beetles; he dreams of reviving her after pulling her out of a pond; and he dreams of embracing her in the sea (pp. 45-6). We learn also that she is to play the lead in a production of *Swan Lake* (p. 40).

As in the preceding stories, however, there is a clear conflict between art and reality. In "Tsarevna-Lebed'" this occurs when the boy's idealized vision of love, which finds expression in his poetry, collides with the sordid reality of Aleksandr's relationship with Katia. It is here, to echo the line from Maiakovskii first encountered in "Ledi Makbet", that "love's

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[17] *Sobr. soch.*, III, p. 57.

boat shatters against the life of everyday", causing the boy to learn new truths about life and love.

When the young hero and his friends think about Katia, the mundaneness of reality is wiped away. "It was as if a gust of wind quietly blew past," the boy explains, "and blew away everything petty and superfluous from us" (p. 42). Thus beauty, like art, is viewed as offering an escape from reality, and it is no coincidence, therefore, that the boy's love for Katia should express itself in the form of poetry. He is also influenced by literature in other ways. Thus it is literature that impels him to spend three days in the cave. He says:

> I knew the "Song of Prophetic Oleg" by heart, and I knew about Cleopatra's death, and I needed something just as spectacular and fatal to reconcile me with the whole world. And above all with her. So let that black, deathly snake of Pushkin bite me. (p. 53).

Nothing so dramatic befalls him, but it is poetry which subsequently helps him to re-evaluate the emotions he feels when she leaves for Moscow. He recalls:

> I was very quiet and sad, but I felt that it was not the same kind of sadness as usual, not the kind I had, for example, when I was sworn at for something at home, or when uncle laughed and said "cavalier", or when I had a "fail" for mathematics in school, or when I got into a fight at break-time. Perhaps it was not even sadness, or bitterness, or pangs of the heart – but in that case what was it? I didn't know.
>
> Oh, if only these lines had then come into my head:
>
> I am sad and at ease, my sadness is radiant,
> My sadness is full of you.
>
> But it was years and years before I was to know of them. (p. 59)

As in the preceding stories, however, the relationship between art and reality is again one of contrast and conflict. The conflict occurs when the boy's idealized vision of love, which finds expression in his poetry,

collides with the sordid reality of Katia's relationship with Aleksandr. It is here that once more "love's boat shatters against the life of everyday", opening the boy's eyes to new, less palatable truths about love and life.

The result, therefore, is that the boy's encounter with beauty is charged with two contrasting meanings, both of which are brought out in the tale by biblical allusions. On the one side, it gives him a vision of life which transcends the mundane, denoting in this sense, as suggested by his Christ-like emergence from the three-day seclusion in the cave, his "resurrection"; on the other, it gives him knowledge of the darker aspects of love and thus acquires the significance of a "fall", as suggested by such allusions to Genesis as the location of the events in a "large apple orchard" (p. 37), Katia's naked dance beneath an apple tree (p. 41), Aleksandr's request that the boy catch a viper for him (p. 39), and the boy's fears in the cave of being bitten by a snake (p. 53). The story of "joyous love" is also a tale of lost innocence.

On the level of style, the short stories have much in common with the longer fiction. Yet again, the reader's senses are repeatedly assailed by the smells, colours and sounds with which Dombrovskii brings to life the different worlds in which his characters live and suffer. Thus in "Ledi Makbet" we note the pervasive smell of damp linen which not only evokes the claustrophobic environment of the hospital, but also becomes emblematic of the linen-keeper, Mar'ia, thus inspiring, in the words of M. Chudakova, a "vague sense of alarm".[18] Ivan, in contrast, after his night of passion with Masha, smells of currants and rain (pp. 66-7), and these scents, temporarily overpowering the smell of the hospital, seem also to acquire a symbolic force, reflecting Ivan's desire to escape from the institutionalized world of Mar'ia. A similarly expressive smell in

[18] M. Chudakova, "Iu. Dombrovskii, 'Ledi Makbet', *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, 1974, No. 8, p. 37.

"Ruchka" is that of slime and stagnant water which is evoked as the writer accompanies the bibliophile to the hut in the wood (p. 94). This smell of inertia and deadness clearly foreshadows the violent death that he suffers in his fevered imagination.

In "Tsarevna-Lebed'", on the other hand, the emphasis is on joy and this is conveyed by the fiesta of sounds and colours in the story. A spectacular whirl of colours is flashed before our eyes; the blue, green and yellow hues of dragonflies (p. 38), the blue, white and pink of the chicory in the changing light (p. 42), and the red and blue camouflage of the grasshopper (p. 43) – and against this colourful background telegraph poles hum (p. 38), birds caw (p. 38), locusts chirr (p. 43) and dogs bark (p. 45). Conveying the young boy's sense of wonderment, this celebration of sounds and colours anticipates the similarly colourful evocation of nature in *Khranitel' drevnostei*.

No such celebration is evident in "Khrizantemy". Here, instead, a significant impact is made by that other feature of Dombrovskii's style which has been noted from the beginning – by the originality and expressiveness of his similes. Thus Irina's eyebrows are likened to arrows (p. 105); Pechorin's announcement of her suicide is uttered "like a shot out of a revolver" (p. 107); and the burden of guilt felt by Nikolai is compared to "a lorry crushing a gaping dog" (p. 108). Connected almost exclusively, as these examples illustrate, with the notions of pain and destruction, the similes contribute notably to the general sense of anguish which pervades the story.

By their style, therefore, as by their theme, the five stories are inseparably related to the longer works. In each of them, as we have seen, the themes of love and guilt are developed in a narrative which hinges on a central traumatic event and incorporates a distinctive development of the

theme of the relationship between art and reality. The inner conflict between art and life experienced by Derzhavin, Leon Maisonnier and Shakespeare is thus externalized in the conflicts between the characters in the stories, confirming it as the unifying theme of Dombrovskii's fiction. The style is similarly idiosyncratic. Grounded in realism, yet fired with drama, the stories possess a cinematographic preciseness which prevents them from becoming "melodramatic", contrary to the author's perception of them. Indeed, the effect is more akin to a documentary than a melodrama; although the events related in the stories are frequently startling, the clarity of the language remains constant. Thus, although we cannot be sure of when the stories were written, the Dombrovskian stamp means that the author of the *magnus opus Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* is readily recognisable in them.

Chapter 7 – *Khranitel' drevnostei*

Dombrovskii began writing *Khranitel' drevnostei*, the first "part" of the bi-partite novel *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, in 1961,[1] and it was published three years later in *Novyi mir*. The circumstances surrounding the publication of this work were fortuitous; Tvardovskii, the editor of the journal at that time, had intially pressed for the publication of Aleksandr Bek's *Novoe naznachenie*, but when this was rejected by the censors, he forwarded *Khranitel' drevnostei* instead.[2] On this occasion he met with success, and the novel duly appeared in the 1964 July and August editions of the journal. This was where Dombrovskii's good fortune ended. The work was greeted with only one review[3] and even though a book edition appeared two years later[4] the critics were to maintain their "shameful conspiracy of silence"[5] towards the novel until the *glasnost'* years.

The first draft of the novel was written as early as 1939,[6] when Dombrovskii was working in the Central Museum of Kazakhstan. Although no copy of this initial draft is extant (Dombrovskii records how it "disappeared, like everything I did and wrote then"),[7] the evidence suggests that it differed greatly from the final novel. For example, the chapter which Dombrovskii read out from the novel in 1939 to an assembled group of literati differs in substance from anything which appears in the 1964 version. Entitled "Mal'chiki", the chapter recounts the experiences of "some boys who fell into the hands of the counter-

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[1] See the notes of his widow, Klara, in *Sobr. soch.*, IV, p. 395.
[2] See Shenfel'd, p. 370; Zhovtis, p. 178.
[3] The review in question is by I. Zolotusskii and is entitled "Govoriashchaia drevnost'", (*Sibirskie ogni*, 1965, No. 10, pp. 179-81).
[4] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Khranitel' drevnostei. Roman.*, Moscow, 1966 (published by *Sovetskaia Rossiia)*.
[5] Shenfel'd, p. 371.
[6] See Proskurin, p. 5; Anisimov and Emstev, p. 707.

intelligence during the Civil War years in the Crimea", and includes a scene in which one of the boys is lead away to be shot.[8] It is difficult to imagine how such a chapter might possibly fit into Dombrovskii's "Alma-Ata story"[9] of 1964, which details the trials and tribulations of a museum curator at the height of the Stalinist Terror. Further evidence that the early version was substantially different from the final novel can be found in comments made by Dombrovskii in 1947. He said: "In 1939 I completed a big novel, *Khranitel' drevnostei* ... which was accepted for publication and reached the stage of the author's proofs. The novel was about the German invasion and the expulsion and death of interventionists".[10] This *precis* of the novel, if we preclude the possibility that Dombrovskii was simply confusing the plot of *Khranitel' drevnostei* with that of *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom*,[11] again suggests a significant disparity between the 1939 novel and the one that appeared on the pages of *Novyi mir* two and a half decades later.

Khranitel' drevnostei is set in 1937 and is narrated by the eponymous "keeper of antiquities", Georgii Zybin.[12] Zybin works as a senior research officer in the Central Museum in Alma-Ata, which is housed in the former cathedral. His quiet routine of dating fragments of pottery and indexing exhibits is shattered by the appearance in the museum of an old man called Rodionov. A former partisan turned treasure hunter, Rodionov believes that a Roman city lies beneath Alma-Ata, basing his theory on the discovery of fragments of earthenware pots and a Roman denarius.

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[7] See his letter to Sergei Antonov, in *Sobr. soch.*, VI, p. 328.

[8] L. Makeev, "Novellisty", *Literatura i iskusstvo Kazakhstana*, 1939, No. 6, p. 82.

[9] *Alma-Atinskaia povest'* was Dombrovskii's original title for *Khranitel' drevnostei*. See Kosenko, p. 62.

[10] See Proskurin, p. 6.

[11] This is the somewhat unconvincing explanation put forward by Proskurin (ibid.).

[12] Throughout *Khranitel' drevnostei* he is referred to simply as "the keeper"; it is not until *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* that we learn his name.

Although Zybin is sceptical about this claim he is persuaded by the museum's director to undertake an exploratory dig on the site of the "Mountain Giant" collective farm. He is aided in this task by his new colleague, Nikolai Semenovich Kornilov, who has joined the museum after resigning from the library following a row with the redoubtable library chief, Aiupova. The cause of this row was Kornilov's collaboration on an article, written by Zybin, which criticized the way the library was being run.

When the excavations finally begin on the collective farm, Zybin's reservations about the project grow, particularly as it is rumoured that a boa-constrictor has escaped from a travelling menagerie and is on the loose in the area. Several people claim to have seen this reptile, including the director of the collective, Brigadier Potapov, and the story starts to make headline news. When Potapov receives a letter from a Zoological Institute in Germany, the Soviet authorities, already on alert because of the threat of impending war, begin to suspect that he is an undercover spy. His subsequent disappearance serves to confirm their suspicions, and Zybin is called in and questioned about his dealings with him. The day after this interrogation Zybin comes face to face with the missing brigadier when he is summoned to meet him in a nearby cave. Here, in his hiding place, Potapov reveals that he has caught the snake which has caused him so much trouble: the "boa-constrictor" of the headlines proves to be nothing more sinister than an abnormally large grass-snake. On their way to the NKVD headquarters with this new evidence of Potapov's innocence, they stop off at a roadside bar, where the barmaid shows Zybin a metal disc given to her by a customer. He immediately suspects that the disc is made of ancient gold, and his suspicions are heightened when he discovers that two similar discs and an earring have been handed in to the

museum. These finds lead him to believe that there is a burial ground nearby which has been plundered by thieves. He plans to search for this site, convinced that he will find there the remains of a primitive young woman, the obvious owner of this gold jewellery. Unbeknown to Zybin, however, the authorities are taking the final steps towards arresting him.

The facts of Dombrovskii's biography, outlined in Chapter 1, evidently form the basis for this novel. Like Zybin, Dombrovskii worked as a research assistant in the Central Museum of Kazakhstan during the late 30s; he wrote a damning article about the municipal library, that attracted unfavourable attention from the authorities;[13] and he was put under suspicion and arrested by the Soviet regime. Zybin also shares many of his creator's characteristics. Indeed, the similarities are so striking that we may assent to Cathala's view that Zybin is Dombrovskii's "*alter ego*".[14] Dombrovskii's breathtaking erudition, for instance, which allowed him to converse with ease on topics as diverse as Saint Augustine, Seneca and the Peloponnesian War,[15] is mirrored in the vast knowledge that Zybin possesses. He is an expert on the birth of Christianity, having spent five years studying it (p. 73);[16] he can effortlessly recall facts about the wheat harvests of ancient Egypt (p. 54); and his professed interest in dendrology provokes even his museum colleague Kornilov to vent amazement at the depth of his learning (p. 242). Like Dombrovskii, who "loved paintings",[17] Zybin also has a passion for art. He delights in the exuberance of primitive art, vividly imagining its evolution from drawings in the sand to a decoration on a pot (pp. 31-2), but he is also appreciative

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[13] This article, entitled "Knizhnye bogatstva Kazakhstana (V gosudarstvennoi publichnoi biblioteke im. Pushkina)", appeared in *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* on 16 July 1937.
[14] Cathala, p. 435.
[15] Ibid., p. 434.
[16] Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent references to Dombrovskii's works are to volume IV of *Sobr. soch.*, and page numbers are entered in the text.

of more modern work, particularly the paintings of a local artist called Khludov (p. 78). Dombrovskii's own eclectic taste in art, evident from the icons and paintings which adorned his appartment,[18] is thus transferred to his fictional hero.

Zybin is also endowed with Dombrovskii's sense of moral probity. In labour camp one of Dombrovskii's nicknames was "Don Quixote" because, according to Arman Malumian, he was "one of those amazing people ... who fight for truth, justice, purity".[19] This heroic quality is carried over into the portrait of Zybin. He too resembles Quixote, as he doggedly strives for truth and justice in the face of increasing paranoia and corruption. When the museum's *massovichka* (the person responsible for education and propaganda) removes a portrait of Iosif Castagnier, a local academic and historian, on the grounds that his pre-revolutionary uniform automatically makes him a "tsarist official" (p. 117), Zybin is furious and demands the portrait be replaced. Although his wish is granted, the dispute makes the authorities aware of his maverick views and he is subsequently summoned to see Miroshnikov, the Deputy People's Commissar for Education. Despite the intimidating atmosphere in the Commissar's office, Zybin refuses to back down over the portrait, and in the end Miroshnikov is forced to ask Zybin to write a detailed memo on Castagnier for the attention of the authorities in Moscow (p. 186). Zybin's affinity with Dombrovskii, who had an "unswerving desire to have his say, no matter what",[20] is thus confirmed.

As this episode with Miroshnikov demonstrates, Zybin appears to be extremely naïve about the political forces at work in 1937 in the Soviet

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[17] Kosenko, p. 69.
[18] See Tsvetkov (p. 117); Shenfel'd (p. 365); and Poremba (p. 124).
[19] Malumian, p. 337.
[20] Shtokman, p. 84.

Union. He seems unaware of the sense of high tension prevailing in this country which is facing the dual threat of war from abroad and Terror from within. This apparent ingenuousness causes the museum director on several occasions to point out the folly of his actions. He warns Zybin that "a very severe time is on its way" (p. 120), and explains the harsh measures that have to be taken to protect Soviet society. Echoing the official propaganda of the day, he says:

> A spy by himself can do nothing. He's not worth a fig. His surroundings – that's what's important. So we are burning down all the surroundings, like your mother used to burn down bugs' nests. And then we will raze the very soil on which this treachery had grown. All those who are unstable, doubting, those who side with them, those preparing themselves for betrayal, present, past and future enemies – we will destroy all that scum in advance. (p. 121).

Unfortunately, Zybin refuses to accept the logic behind this thinking. "But can we really punish someone for a crime before the crime has been committed?" he asks. "That means punishing not for something but in the name of something" (p. 121). The comment illustrates how Zybin sees things in simple terms of right and wrong, with no allowance for political machinations or possible repercussions.

His naivete in such matters stems from his isolation from the everyday politics of the museum. As the "keeper of antiquities" he has hitherto worked in solitude, taking refuge in the bell-tower of the former cathedral which is now the museum. This isolation evidently suits him, as the impromptu notices written by colleagues on the door of his office bear witness. Zybin explains:

> During working hours I sat in my "Archaeological Office". Such was called a large light room in the cathedral's choir. Over this ancient inscription someone had painted "Keeper of Antiquities"

> and somebody else had added "And you are strictly forbidden to see him", and a third had simply nailed a piece of tin on to it in the shape of a skull and crossbones" (p. 29).

These comments on Zybin's introversion are wholly appropriate. By his own admission he hates "crowds, crushes, throngs" (p. 24) and he continually seeks the sanctuary of solitude. He has a professed "weakness" for attics (p. 24), and he continually seeks out similar such quiet places; even when inebriated after a drinking session at the "Mountain Giant" farm, his first instinct is to make a dash for the hayloft (p. 149). This need for solitude is traced back to his childhood, and to a secret den he used to have under a bandstand in a Moscow park. It was here, in his "sanctuary", he tells us, that he "first got to know the quiet dusk of caves, the mystery and silence of deep crevices" (p. 95). His future role as "keeper of antiquities" is moreover anticipated by the way in which he used to oversee the collection of lost toys that found their way into the den. He says:

> I found a lot of the most interesting things. They had irrevocably disappeared from the face of the earth and turned up here, by my feet. Especially numerous were all types of balls - big ones and completely tiny ones, bright ones and dull ones, black, tightly-filled ones with thin coverings, painted in sections in delicate, complementary colours. (p. 95)

Perhaps we can detect here in Zybin's appreciation of the markings on these toys an early indicator of the keen aesthetic sense that was to develop in him as an adult.

The world of Zybin's childhood den would therefore seem to have been recreated by him in the bell-tower of the former cathedral. His treasures are now no longer lost toys but ancient artefacts, but his belief that he can

observe the outside world yet remain untouched by it stays the same. This belief, however, is exposed as an "an illusion",[21] for even in his bell-tower Zybin cannot escape the events of 1937 unfolding beneath him. His realization that he is no longer able to maintain his isolation is accompanied by a frustrated outpouring which takes the form of a dramatized dialogue:

> "Comrades," I say with all my quiet being, "I am an archaeologist, I have hidden myself up in the bell-tower and I sit up there, sorting out the palaeolithic period, bronze, ceramics, dating broken pieces of pottery, from time to time drinking vodka with the old man and in no way poking my nose into your business down below. Fifty-five metres above the ground - that's a long way up. What is it that you want from me?" And they reply: "History is your personal business, you fool. It's your skin, your flesh and blood, your very being! And you can't escape from it anywhere - not in a tower, no matter how high it might be, in the bronze age or iron age, or by disguising yourself as an archaeologist. "I am the keeper of antiquities," I say, "antiquities, and that is all! Have you come across this word - an-ti-qui-ties?" "Yes we have," they reply. "We have understood for a long time why you hid yourself away up there! Now just stop this nonsense, it's pointless! Climb down from your bell-tower!" (pp. 175-6)

Inevitably, of course, Zybin is forced to "climb down" because his role as "keeper of antiquities" demands him to defend the relics of the past from the defacing hand of Stalinism. It is a role for which he is well-suited. History is indeed his "flesh and blood", and he is able to view even the ancient past as something that is alive. When he looks at the bones of a sixth-century Usuni tribesman, for example, he is able to envisage his "rheumatic fingers" and "rotten teeth", and even imagines him giving his dog, which is buried alongside him, a bad-tempered kick (p. 53). He is similarly able to bring to life his "sleeping beauty", the primitive woman

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[21] Zolotusskii, "Govoriashchaia drevnost'", p. 179.

whom he suspects is lying in a nearby burial ground. "The two thousand years that passed over her head had changed nothing", he muses, "no more than two or three golden sequins from her bridal dress had fallen into our hands; the rest was intact. No-one had found her yet, no-one had robbed her ... She was still inviolate, still a virgin bride" (p. 284). It is precisely this ability to perceive the "code of the individual human position" through the "thickness of the centuries"[22] which sets him in opposition to the Soviet state and its attempts to erase human meaning from the past. He despairs, for instance, when he sees the impersonal way in which the Usuni tomb is presented by the museum authorities. He says:

> The old man died, the dog was killed ... and all this in thousands of years lost its true human meaning and became a valuable scientific object and monument. And in this monument neither old age nor poverty nor humanity has been preserved. All that remained was a box, about a metre and a half in size, under glass with a sign saying "Usuni burial of the sixth century" (p. 53).

The failure of the authorities to attribute any meaning to such an artefact is symptomatic of their view of history as an irrelevance. In the "glorious 'new age' of *homo sovieticus*" prevailing under Stalin "only the present is important",[23] and it is this system of thought which Zybin challenges.

Three characters who most clearly exemplify the Soviet view of history are Zoia, the *massovichka*, Aiupova, the library chief, and Miroshnikov, the Deputy Commissar for Education. Zoia, as her title implies, is concerned with presenting history in a way that is easily accessible to the masses. When Zybin criticizes the historical inaccuracy of an exhibit showing Galileo's reununciation, she defends it by saying that it fulfils the basic criteria: it is "graphic" and it "educates" the museum visitor (pp.

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[22] Shtokman, p. 96.

227-8). Historical accuracy counts for nothing. Aiupova takes a similar stance. When Zybin writes a newspaper article about how the valuable books in the library are lying in a state of disorder and neglect, she is quick to point out that such information has little relevance for the masses. "Soviet people are not interested in that sort of thing," she tells him, "they are interested in the service a library gives its readers - they are not interested in how many fifteenth- or sixteenth- century books it has collected" (p. 103).

Aiupova's dismissive attitude towards the rare historical books of which she is guardian is certainly alarming. Yet more alarming, however, is the attitude displayed by Miroshnikov. Like Aiupova, he criticizes Zybin for focusing on the stock of antique books rather than on the "hundreds" of satisfied customers that visit the library every day (p. 184). This time, however, the argument is taken one step further, as he urges Zybin to measure history precisely in terms of the Soviet present. "Link antiquity more closely with our times", he intones. "You know, there was this poet called Bezymenskii. He put it very well when he wrote: 'Only he who can find world revolution in trivialities is worthy of our times.' So, look for world revolution in all your little artefacts. Every exhibit should remind people only of this" (p. 186). This arrogant belief in the supremacy of the new Soviet age is ultimately tested when Miroshnikov is arrested and sent to prison camp, as related in the appendix to *Khranitel' drevnostei* entitled "Iz zapisok Zybina", but even then he continues to defend the measures taken by the State .[24]

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[23] Woodward, "Cosmic", p. 901.

[24] *Sobr. soch.*, IV, pp. 289-314. The excerpt was intended for publication as part of the novel, but it failed to get past the censors.

The irony of Miroshnikov's advice to "link antiquity more closely with our times" is made apparent when Zybin subsequently consults an encyclopedia for information about the Emperor Aurelian, whose name appears on a Roman denarius discovered in the Alma-Ata region. He starts to draw up a list of Aurelian's positive and negative qualities based on the information he finds, but what emerges is a thinly veiled critique of Stalin. We learn that Aurelian "distinguished himself by such harshness that he brought imaginary accusations of a conspiracy against many people in order to obtain an easy opportunity of punishing them", (p. 195) and that "many of the most eminent people were even killed on the basis of flimsy accusations coming from a single, unreliable witness" (p. 196). The allusions here to the practices of the Soviet judiciary are obvious, especially as this passage comes shortly after we have seen the Security Police in action during the arrest of the museum bursar (pp. 169-74). Further allusions to Stalin and his "cult of personality" are to be found in the revelations that Aurelian was the "first to call himself god" and even had the words "Deus et Dominus" stamped on coins (p. 196). Miroshnikov's counsel to "link" antiquity with the present is thus implemented through the historical parallels established between the Roman despot and the Soviet tyrant, and as a result the reference in the novel's epigraph to leaders "most talented in cruelty" (p. 7) gains particular resonance.[25] As Shtokman says, "the keeper looks for and finds historical precedents, analogies for what he sees happening around him, and they are not very comforting".[26]

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[25] This epigraph, taken from Tacitus's *Life of Agricola*, Vol. 3, didn't appear in print until 1989. Dombrovskii added it to an off-print of the novel which he gave to his wife, who subsequently forwarded it for publication (see *Sobr. soch.*, IV, pp. 395-6)

[26] Shtokman, p. 97.

It is not surprising that Zybin seeks answers in the past to the bizarre events of the present. Alma-Ata in 1937 is a disconcerting place. Rumours abound of impending war and escaped deadly snakes; renowned academics, such as Iosif Castagnier, are denounced as enemies of the Soviet state; and a new sabotage plot is being uncovered daily. Zolotusskii has noted how the novel investigates "the causes and physiognomy of despotism, its illusory strength and its real consequences",[27] and at the heart of this investigation is the ease with which the Soviet populace is able to accept outlandish propaganda such as that listed above. To illustrate further the scope and nature of the propaganda Dombrovskii, describes a scandal involving grain-store workers who have been accused of infecting the grain with a harmful mite. We read:

> Lots of the workers responsible were arrested and with each day the number of arrests grew and grew. After some prominent famous names came completely ordinary people - labourers, despatch clerks, accountants, laboratory assistants. They were tried behind closed doors in a military court. The sentences given were severe - there were even executions by firing squad (p. 142).

The sheer scale of this scandal makes it almost impossible for people to believe that it could be a State-generated fabrication. Although such facts shore up the State's "illusory strength" in the mind of the populace, however, they are not sufficient to convince Zybin. In the course of discussing the plot with Potapov he suddenly realises that it is all "rubbish". "Nobody could infect whole grain elevators with germs", he reasons out loud (p. 143). His sense of scepticism increases when he hears the brigadier's story about his brother's interrogation and

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[27] Zolotusskii, p. 179.

subsequent execution for his part in the plot. Zybin says: "I sat and listened to this story with a strange sort of feeling. I understood that something new was arising in me, something suddenly ripened and inverted all my ideas" (p. 148). For Potapov, however, it is more difficult to accept that the plot might be a fabrication, precisely because his brother was killed for taking part in it. "Do you really think he was given nine grammes of lead for nothing?", he asks Zybin incredulously (pp. 143-4). The shooting, one of the "real consequences" of the State's "illusory" strength, therefore becomes "proof" of the plot for, as Potapov realizes, the idea that people are being shot "for nothing" is too monstrous to contemplate. In this uncertain world, it is easier for people to accept the facts as presented by the State than to face the horrifying truth.

In this society, where the "lawlessness" being openly committed by the State is accepted as something "everyday",[28] the most inhuman behaviour is similarly accepted as the norm. The best example of this is to be found in the episode involving Mrs Van der Belen. A prosector from the local medical institute, Mrs Van der Belen comes to Zybin with some "business". She reveals that she has incinerated her dead lover, Dr Blinderman, and now requires someone to sculpt a bust of him out of his ashes (p. 67). The obviously grotesque nature of this scene is intensified when we learn that his ashes are sitting in a sugar jar on her window-sill until she finds someone to undertake this ghoulish commission (p. 68). The element of humour here, born out of the "co-presence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable",[29] is further heightened when the authorities come to arrest the deceased man in this very state (p. 69).

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[28] Nikolaev, p. 198.
[29] P. Thomson, *The Grotesque*, London, 1972, p. 3.

As this incident suggests, Dombrovskii employs the grotesque in the novel to communicate the unsettling atmosphere of paranoia prevailing at the height of the Terror. He achieves this primarily through the depiction of Alma-Ata as a world which is "familiar and apparently harmonious" yet which is under the impact of "abysmal forces which break it up and shatter its coherence". [30] This typically grotesque combination of the familiar and the strange is exemplified by the description of Zybin's arrival in the Kazakh capital. Although we are introduced into the "trusted world of the experiences of the author-narrator"[31] at a precisely dated location and time – Alma-Ata in 1933 - we are simultaneously plunged into an "unusual world" full of exotic vegetation and wildlife. A sense of the "abysmal forces" at work in the city is suggested by the way in which the flora is running wild. Zybin says: "everything was blossoming, even things which on the whole weren't supposed to - fallen down fences (the grass pushed right through them), the walls of houses, roofs, puddles under yellow duckweed, pavements and roadways" (pp. 7-8). The sense of alienation engendered in Zybin by this strange world is moreover emphasized by the fact that he ends up going around in circles due to the lack of distinctive landmarks (p. 8).

The impact of the "abysmal forces" on the "familiar world" is apparent throughout the novel. The miasmic atmosphere of paranoia and hysteria prevailing in Alma-Ata affects even everyday objects, which are presented in frightening and unsettling terms. Thus, a boulder by the side of the Alma-Atinka river is likened to a "bear that has just crawled out of its lair after hibernation" (p. 242); a roadside brazier appears as a "dragon that has had its head bluntly chopped off" (p. 265); and the voice of the old

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[30] Kayser, W., *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (translated by U. Weisstein), 1981, New York, p. 37.

man Rodionov is likened to an axe (p. 280). As these examples indicate, in this world we cannot be sure of what is alive and what is dead, as the dividing line between these categories has become blurred. This is clearly exemplifed by the way in which living women are described in decidedly moribund terms in the novel, while dead women are made to appear vital and vibrant. The association between Mrs Van der Belen and death, for instance, is immediately established by the revelation that she wants to have the ashes of her dead lover sculpted into a bust, yet she herself is described as being "bony, like death" (p. 68). Symbolically, this association with death is reinforced by the revelation that she is of Georgian descent (p. 69). Another character who crosses the boundary between the living and the dead is the character known simply as "Madam Death", who is nothing more than a "skeleton of a woman".[32] In contrast to these deathly figures, the women who are actually dead and buried are presented in terms of the living. The woman excavated from beneath the Appian Way, for instance, was so beautiful, it is noted, that bridegrooms used to forsake their living brides to be with her (p. 234), and Zybin in turn imagines his own "sleeping beauty" as if she were a real woman (p. 284).

Other examples of the blurring of the boundary between the inanimate and the animate emerge in the similes which abound in the novel. Thus, the *massovichka* is compared to an enema (p. 112); the museum sculptor is likened to a little suitcase (p. 232); and Aiupova, the head of the municipal library, is described as having skin like "oiled paper" (p. 86). The overall result of this "suspension of the category of objects",[33] as Kayser terms this blurring of categories, is to show how, under the Stalinist regime, the

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[31] Flaker, p. 39.
[32] Zolotusskii, p. 180.
[33] Kayser, p. 40.

natural order of things has become distorted; the dead seem alive, the living seem dead, and people have been dehumanized.

The reality of Soviet life in the novel is thus established as deceptive and untrustworthy. The question thus arises; what is reliable and true in this nightmarish scenario? The answer is to be found in the immutable world of art and antiquity. The Dombrovskian theme of reality versus art, familiar from his earlier fiction, is thus once more evoked. The transitory nature of the era of *homo sovieticus* is confirmed by the numerous references to art and the the past which litter the text like shards of ancient potsherds. There are references to writers such as Aeschylus (p. 137) Shakespeare (p. 70) and Nietzsche (pp. 190-2); allusions to scholars such as Copernicus (pp. 70, 97), Erasmus (p. 97), Ptolemy (p. 97) and Galileo (pp. 97, 227); and digressions on the creations of artists such as Khludov (pp. 75-84) and Zenkov (pp. 13-23). By continually drawing our attention to the vista of history and to man's immortal achievements in the field of art in this way, Dombrovskii reminds us that the horrors of the Stalinist regime will inevitably pass.

The digression on the architect Zenkov is particularly significant in this connection. It was Zenkov, we learn, who built the majestic cathedral in Alma-Ata which now houses the museum. What makes this feat more remarkable, however, is that he succeeded in building the cathedral to survive the frequent earthquakes that strike the city. The immortal quality of Zenkov's achievement is emphasized by Zybin, who informs us decades later that "nothing of his legacy has been touched by people, time or earthquakes" (p. 18).

Although this digression on Zenkov, which occupies much of the first chapter, has been criticized for being "didactically dry",[34] it is important for the analogies it presents with Zybin's situation. The defiance shown by Zenkov before the destructive force of the earthquake foreshadows Zybin's dogged stance against the Stalinist regime. Like Zenkov, who had a "deep belief" in the future of the town he built (p. 16), the "keeper of antiquities" equally has unshakeable faith in his role. Although he recognizes that the power of the Stalinist machine appears all-encompassing, he never abandons his belief that good will prevail. This belief is most clearly expressed when he likens himself to a small puddle on the shore of a massive ocean. "Here is a huge, heavy-breathing, slow-moving, living infinity", he thinks to himself, "and here am I - a little hollow, a small footprint on the wet sand, a mouthful of cold salt water. But no matter how much you try to bail it out, you won't empty it, for the ocean is also here" (p. 176).

Beauty provides Zybin with another antidote to the nightmarish world of Soviet reality. As the "keeper of antiquities" he delights in the "simplest, most innocent joys of life, in the enjoyment of beauty in all its forms",[35] and this manifests itself chiefly in his appreciation of women and nature. Thus, he admires the comely appearance of his colleague, Klara, a "beautiful, slender, darkskinned Kazakh with black hair", as he describes her (p. 113), and he comments, when he sees her standing by the roadside, that "girls like that don't have to wait more than a couple of minutes for a lift" (p. 266). His sensitivity to female beauty is such that he is even able to envisage the "sleeping beauty" whose grave he suspects has been plundered. "She was tall, with delicate fingers and an oblong face," he

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[34] Ibid., p. 179.
[35] Woodward, "Pushkin", p. 352.

enthuses, "and everyone, naturally, considered her to be beautiful" (p. 284). He views nature with a similarly appreciative eye. When he first encounters the famous Alma-Ata poplars, for example, he is transfixed by their beauty, and it is no coincidence that he apprehends the beauty of the trees with reference to feminine beauty . He says:

> I simply turned the corner - and suddenly an entire family of tall, slender, pliantly curved trees ran half-way to meet me. 'Eastern dancing girls', I thought. And everything about them - their lacquered crimson needles, mother-of-pearl catkins (exactly like sea-water mussels), clusters of white flowers (exactly like bridal veils), and their extraordinary flexibility - everything reminded you of 'dancing girls'(p. 8).

These "remarkable" trees (p. 9) act as "constant companions"[36] to Zybin throughout his tribulations, as we will see to full effect in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, yet even in *Khranitel' drevnostei* the significant role played by nature is made clear. As Zybin strolls through the leafy suburbs of Alma-Ata, he acknowledges the calming effect that the natural beauty of this "extraordinary city" has on him (p. 7) . "However agitated you are", he says, "whatever you are going through, just walk through these twenty or so blocks and everything will fall into place" (p. 275). This notion of nature as a sanctuary is highlighted when Zybin runs out of the museum following a heated discussion with his boss, Mitrofan Stepanovich. Once outside, his first thought is to escape to the mountains. We read:

> It was a clear, pink, transparent morning; there was a slight breeze in the air. The poplars rustled, but the hills were so distinct and prominent that it seemed as if they began directly where the park ended. Blue forests clambered up their slopes. I stood looking at

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[36] Woodward, "Cosmic", p. 907.

> them and thought about how, if I hitched a lift straightaway, I could be up in that coldness and purity within half an hour (p. 122).

Ironically, even the "coldness and purity" of the mountains fail to provide him with an escape from the lunacy of Stalinism, for it is here that he meets Potapov and becomes embroiled in the affair of the "boa-constrictor".

The battle between the forces of good and evil in the novel is thus clearly mapped out as Zybin, the "keeper of antiquities", confronts the philistines of the Soviet regime. The significance of this battle between good and evil is underlined by the allusions to the book of Genesis. As Woodward has noted, the motifs of Eve, the apple and the serpent permeate the entire novel. The first direct reference to the Biblical motif of the apple is made by Potapov, when he rhetorically asks what it was the serpent used to tempt Eve with (p. 133). The setting of the events in Alma-Ata, a city whose name, we are told, means "the father of apples" (p. 125), is, by extension, given added significance, as it becomes the place where Zybin experiences his own "fall". It is the image of the snake, however, which dominates the narrative. It plays an especially important role in the story of the escaped "boa constrictor", and its Biblical associations are made clear to us from the early stages by the newspaper report which refers to the snake as the "legendary, biblical beast" (p. 39). These associations are reinforced by the direct connections which are made between the snake and apples. The creature is alleged to feed itself on the "best ripe apples" from the trees (p. 37), while the branches of the apple-trees themselves are subsequently likened to snakes (p. 126). Dombrovskii, however, does not confine himself to the Biblical frame of reference. He develops the image of the snake in his own way, making particularly notable use of its

associations with the idea of hypnosis. The connection is initially established by the disclosure that the menagerie from which the snake escaped, headed significantly by a "Georgian", has a hypnotist as one of its performers (p. 205). It then reappears, for example, in Rodionov's account of the legendary Civil War rebel Marushka, who allegedly used her "green, snake-like eyes" to hypnotize and escape from her captors (p. 162). Originating in the description of the mysterious menagerie, the connection between the snake and hypnosis forms a sustained allusion to the "Georgian's" control over the minds of his subjects.

On a thematic level, *Khranitel' drevnostei* clearly shows the development of themes which occur in the earlier novels. The conflicts between Good and Evil, between the individual and the State which have already been established as typically Dombrovskian themes, are reworked here. A similar continuity is evident on a stylistic level. The vividness of the descriptive passages for example, which characterizes the earlier works, is again apparent. Dombrovskii engages all our senses in his evocation of Alma-Ata. Poremba has called the work an "almost carnival, animated picture, drawn in bright colours",[37] and the rich hues of the novel's "backdrop of southern exoticism"[38]are certainly brought to life by Dombrovskii. When Zybin first arrives in Alma-Ata he, like us, is overcome by the variety of colours and sounds which assault his senses. Bees and butterflies hover around yellow, red, and purple flowers (p. 8); the white terraces of acacias compete with the various pink, white and cream flowers of the abundant orchards (p. 9); and the air is filled with the sound of cockerels, frogs and orioles (p. 10). The vibrant, "carnival" picture is, however, tempered by a note of foreboding, as the visual appeal

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[37] Poremba, p. 121.
[38] Woodward, "Cosmic", p. 897.

of the narrative is tainted by the introduction of unpleasant smells. Thus, the storeroom in the collective farm reeks of bast matting and salted fish (p. 128); the decay in nature brought about by the onset of autumn is accompanied by the "viscous" smell of "withering grass, heavy autumn flowers" (p. 233) and of "wet detritus and leaves" (p. 254); and the museum basement is full of the smell of "mould and damp stone" (p. 269). The imperceptible spiritual and moral decay taking place in Soviet society is thus suggested by the stench of decay which Dombrovskii introduces into his visually colourful narrative.

Another feature of *Khranitel' drevnostei* that reminds us of the earlier fiction is the repetition of seemingly unrelated details. The purpose of this typically Dombrovskian technique is illuminated by a passage in the novel which deals with the subject of dendrology. When Zybin examines a lump of wood dug up by Kornilov in the course of his excavations, he is reminded of a book on dendrology he read as a child which established the link between tree-rings and history. Zybin reveals how this link between "everything with everything else" amazed him. He says:

> I thought: perhaps this is only the beginning and that far more delicate, untraceable threads unite the cosmos and the pine-tree, the hazel bush and the constellation of Orion. Who knows what eclipses, northern lights, comets, and flares of new stars our predecessors will be able to read on the surface of, let us say, an old cupboard, dragged down from an attic. Perhaps the entire celestial sky is enciphered there! (p. 240).

This connection of "everything with everything else" is precisely the way in which Dombrovskii's technique of textual cross-reference works. A reference to an event or object at the beginning of a novel is echoed in a similar, often fleeting, reference elsewhere in the work. For example, the references to the decorative swastikas on primitive bowls (pp. 31, 52)

anticipate the later conversation Zybin has with the museum director about Hitler and the Nazis (p. 201); Castagnier's research into the pyramids of Egypt and Mexico (p. 30) is echoed in the "pyramid" of broken chairs found in the museum bursar's attic (p. 172) and the plywood pyramid which appears in the old photos of the park (p. 14); and the camel engraved on the ancient jewellery handed in to the museum (p. 272) is anticipated in the reference to Mrs Van der Belen's "camel-like" features (p. 67). Although these "echoes" have no intrinsic symbolic significance, their purpose is to reaffirm the unseen "untraceable threads" which link "everything with everything" in the continuum of history.

In conclusion, therefore, the links between *Khranitel' drevnostei* and the preceding novels are clear. On a thematic level, the conflict between the individual and the State, the significance of the role of nature and the clash between art and reality are already familiar from the earlier fiction. As a character, Zybin also takes his place in the genealogy of Dombrovskii's heroes. Like Derzhavin, Leon Maisonnier and Shakespeare, he too experiences an inner conflict which he overcomes in the course of the narrative. Despite his love of isolation, Zybin decides that he has to come down from his "tower" in order to protect the integrity of the antiquities of which he is guardian. He defends truth and the moral values which come under attack from the Stalinist regime – justice, loyalty and integrity. The novel's central concern is precisely this clash between Good and Evil. Despite the encroaching evil of the Soviet Terror, however, the mood of the novel remains optimistic, as we are left in little doubt that good will prevail. The best example of the way in which the positive mood persists in spite of circumstances hostile to it comes at the end of the novel, when Zybin is seen chatting to two women who, we have just learnt, have been preparing documents for his arrest. The accompanying description of a

new day dawning serves to show the triviality of even this impending event in the context of the never-ending cycles of time:

> The first birds were waking up, the first passers-by were hurrying about. Somewhere far in the distance the high clear sound of the first tram resounded and we three stood there, looked at the sky, breathed in the fresh air and gaily talked about how the day was going to turn out clear and fine (p. 286).

In the closing sentences of his novel, therefore, Dombrovskii reasserts his belief that Good will always conquer Evil and that man's tenacity will forever overcome historical obstacles, a message that is reinforced in his final work, *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei.*

Chapter 8 – *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*

Dombrovskii began work on *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* in December 1964, only three months after completing *Khranitel' drevnostei*. This endeavour was to take him eleven years, with the novel finally gaining publication only in 1978 in France.[1] On completing the work, Dombrovskii explained in a letter to Tkhorzhevskii how the two novels had been planned at the outset as the two parts of a single novel. "And so now it is one whole", he writes, "*Khranitel' drevnostei* and *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*. It was conceived like this from the very beginning".[2] It was not until 1989, however, that the two novels appeared together as such in a combined edition in Russia.[3]

The continuity between the two novels is apparent from a cursory glance at the opening of *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*.[4] Characters such as Zybin, Kornilov and the museum director reappear, and the events once more take place in Alma-Ata. The plot is set in motion when two workmen, Ivan Antonovich Yumashev and Vasily Suchkov, hand in some fragments of gold jewellery and an ancient skull to the city's museum. The museum director, Stepan Mitrofanovich,[5] takes the identity cards from these treasure-hunters and pays them for the gold. By the following day the two men have disappeared without trace, taking their cards and some of the gold with them. Zybin realises that the skull belongs to his "sleeping beauty" and is determined to track down the treasure-hunters in order to ascertain the whereabouts of the burial mound

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[1] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, Paris, 1978 (YMCA Press).
[2] See Tkhorzhevskii, p. 198.
[3] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei,* Moscow, 1989.
[4] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Fakul'tet nenuznykh veshchei* in *Sobr. soch.* ,V, Moscow 1993. All references, unless otherwise indicated, are to this edition and page numbers are hereafter entered in the text.
[5] In *Khranitel' drevnostei* the director's name is given as Mitrofan Stepanovich (see *Sobr. soch.*, IV, p. 51). A similar discrepancy arises with regards to Kornilov's name. In *Khranitel' drevnostei* it appears as Nikolai Semenovich (*Sobr. soch.*, IV, p. 84), whereas in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* it is given as Vladimir Mikhailovich (*Sobr. soch.*, V, p. 20).

from which it has been recovered. He thus embarks on a piece of detective work which takes him to the river Ili where, he deduces, the bounty-seekers had been fishing. Unfortunately his investigation is cut short, as he is arrested by the NKVD on suspicion of being involved in the theft of the gold. His arrest is also partly due to political motives, for the authorities in Alma-Ata are keen to stage their own "show-trial" of the kind being seen in Moscow. Zybin is thus put into prison, where his waking hours are interspersed with vivid dreams. His cellmate, Aleksandr Ivanovich Buddo, initiates him into the horrors of prison life, from the beatings to the false imprisonments, and through repeated interrogations by numerous officers - Khripushin, Shtern, Neiman and Tamara Dolidze - Zybin becomes fully cognizant of the workings of the secret police.

Zybin's colleague, Kornilov, is meanwhile called in by the NKVD and asked to inform on a defrocked priest by the name of Andrei Kutorga. Kornilov befriends Kutorga and they spend long hours discussing Biblical matters and the betrayal of Jesus by Judas in particular. He diligently relays the substance of these conversations to the secret police, only to discover that he has been double-crossed by Kutorga. He realises that he has little choice but to become a police informer in order to preserve his liberty, and he is given the codename "Gadfly". The action then switches back to Zybin in prison. In contrast to Kornilov, the keeper has stubbornly resisted all attempts to incriminate himself, and as a result has been put into solitary confinement. His dreams and the interrogations continue, and slowly his spirit begins to weaken. He is saved, ironically, by Neiman, one of his interrogating officers, whose lover, Marietta, has been given some ancient gold by some fisherman. On seeing the gold, Neiman realises that he has found the evidence that absolves Zybin from any part in the original theft from the museum. It is

as a result of this chance discovery of the gold, and of the failure of the authorities' attempt to stage a show trial, that Zybin is finally released from prison.

This simplified summary of the plot belies the complexity of this multi-layered work. *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* is unquestionably the "pinnacle of Iurii Dombrovskii's work".[6] The themes of Good versus Evil, betrayal and justice which appear in the earlier works are developed here to give the fullest insight into Dombrovskii's concerns as a writer. At the same time the characteristic features of style evident from the earlier fiction are perfected, such as the use of textual "echoes".

The affinity between *Khranitel' drevnostei* and *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* is immediately apparent. Once again Zybin emerges as the "keeper of antiquities". His guardianship of the cultural heritage of the past is demonstrated in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* by his wide-ranging references to ancient writers. Thus at the very outset he recalls some lines from the poetry of Alcaeus (pp. 19, 47) and alone at night he is reminded of the words of Seneca (p. 111). But his cultural awareness is not confined to antiquity. He also quotes from Pushkin, for example, in the course of a discussion with his cellmate Buddo (p. 173) and makes several veiled references in the course of the work to *Hamlet*.[7] It is this cultural tradition of Pushkin, Shakespeare and Seneca which Stalin and his followers seek to destroy, in order to replace it with the new tradition of *homo sovieticus*, which rejects the "unnecessary" values of justice and morality.

The resultant conflict between these two ideological standpoints is first seen in a passage in which Zybin is interrogated by an attractive female

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[6] Shtokman, p. 98.

[7] He paraphrases the line "Though this be madness, yet there is method in it" (p. 173), and he later thinks of his nurse as an "Ophelia" (p. 614), thus harking back to Neiman's previous encounter with a drowned girl.

officer, Valentina Anikeeva. Referring again to *Hamlet*, Zybin, after quoting from the play, reprimands her for not knowing who Polonius is (p. 96). Valentina's retort comes in the form of a stinging indictment of Zybin's classical education. She tells him that the faculty in which he studied was a "faculty of unnecessary things – a study of formalities, pieces of paper and procedures. But they taught us how to establish the truth" (p. 97). Zybin's continuing references to writers ancient and modern express his response to this flippant dismissal of the relevance of culture and literature which is typical of the Soviet attitude as presented in the novel. He alludes to Tolstoi's *Voskresenie* in the course of being interrogated by Neiman (p. 154); he quotes from Dostoevskii and Goethe (p. 163); and he discusses Tacitus with the prisoner Kalandarashvili (p. 467-8). These repeated references to art and artists demonstrate how the rejected cultural past "keeps raising its head" in the work, as if "defiantly declaring its refusal to die".[8]

Such references to the artistic heritage of the past serve to underline that the philistinism of the Stalinist present is only a transitory phase of history. The frequent evocations of the Roman empire likewise serve as a reminder that even seemingly invincible regimes crumble and disappear. Thus, the Spartacus uprising is mentioned in the opening few pages by Professor Dubrovskii (p. 27), and is later evoked again by Khripushin, who tells Kornilov that his new code-name "Gadfly" is the "name of a great revolutionary, like that of Spartacus" (p. 374). Roman emperors such as Augustus and Nero feature in Zybin's dreams (p. 138), and Kutorga and Kornilov have a discussion about the reign of Tiberius (pp. 347-8). The references to such Roman despots remind us that even tyrants such as these die, and it is thus implied that Stalin's regime is similarly transient.

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[8] Woodward, "Cosmic", p. 901.

The notion that Stalin's regime is but a temporary phase in history is also expressed more directly. Significant, for example, is the episode in which Zybin, after his initial interrogation by the NKVD, sees lights on in his house and assumes (mistakenly, as it turns out) that the authorities are conducting a search. Taking refuge in a nearby park, he comes across the grave of a general and his wife, and from the description it emerges clearly that this quondam hero has been recently disgraced: "There were two graves: that of General Kolpakovskii and his wife. Once there were flower-beds here, there was a fence on which an inextinguishable icon lamp hung. Now there was nothing" (p. 101). Moved by the sight of these denuded graves, which are now merely separated from the park by an anchor chain, Zybin vows to the dishonoured couple that they will soon be remembered again. He says:

> My science hasn't reached you yet, you're much too young for it. A hundred years – is that really a period for archaeology? But all the same you will soon be remembered. They will remember you, damn them, mark my words! They will drag back the marble slabs and engrave your names on them in bronze. They'll probably take this chain away soon too – there's no point in it, they'll say, having it inland! Everything will pass, everything will change, my dearly departed ones! (p. 103)

Again, therefore, Dombrovskii stresses the inexorable march of time and the huge span of history, which makes even a hundred years seem trivial.

The transience of Stalin's regime is also symbolically conveyed in the scene in which Zybin and his museum colleague Klara find themselves in a grove of dodder-stricken trees. The dodder is slowly strangling the trees to death, but Zybin realises that it is also dying itself along with the trees on which it is feeding. He tells Klara: "It will also die ... it just doesn't know it. It is just as mortal as they are. It will drink their juice to the last drop and then it will die" (p. 130). As Kim has remarked, this

provides a clear message that Stalin's terror "which annihilates so many people" is destined to "perish itself".[9]

The image evoked here of the regime as a parasite, sucking the vital blood from the nation, is reinforced by the numerous references to vampires in the novel. The first reference comes when Zybin, in a dream, remembers an occasion when he and Lina had climbed up to a ramshackle cemetery. Their encounter there with the cemetery's old caretaker prompts Lina, decidedly nervous about being in a cemetery after dusk, to ask about the presence of vampires (p. 226). The old man laughs derisively at the idea and reassures her, in words that Stalin would have applauded, that "a dead person is the most harmless type!" (p. 226). The next references to vampires occur in Part III of the novel,[10] in the course of one of Kutorga's conversations with Kornilov. Describing the Roman empire, he refers to the emperors who "crawled" over the earth as "vampires and freaks" (p. 289), and in the same terms he then describes the "ruddy dwarf and the half-crazed Moses", that is, Ezhov and Stalin, calling them "two vampires" (p. 355).

The image of the vampire, however, alludes to a draining of the people's life blood by the State which is as much literal as metaphorical, for it prepares the way for the revelation of the State's plan to use the blood from tortured prisoners for transfusions (p. 585). Planning to rob man of the plasma that gives him life, the Stalinist regime is thus shown to contravene the laws of nature. The unnaturalness of this act is underlined in the passage in which Zybin looks out of the window of his interrogator's office and is overcome by the delightful sight of nature that greets him. He is transfixed by the poplar trees and, in particular, by the thought of the "green blood" coursing through their "veins" and the

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[9] Kim, p. 80.
[10] The novel is sub-divided into five parts.

"millions of tiny hearts" pulsing inside their greenery (p. 390). This anthropomorphization of the poplar tree – a process begun in *Khranitel' drevnostei* – confronts the State's unnatural act with the hero's respect for life in all its forms. The poplars, as Woodward remarks, are frequently seen "peering through" the windows of the interrogation rooms as if wanting to "communicate their strength" to Zybin during his ordeal.[11] Woodward also notes the similar presence of the poplars during the interrogation of Kornilov (p. 311) and comments that in this instance they have little effect on the detainee.[12] This once again serves to highlight the parallel positions in which Zybin and Kornilov find themselves and emphasizes the differences between the routes they finally decide to follow.

Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei thus plainly mirrors the themes of the earlier fiction, and of *Khranitel' drevnostei* in particular. The clash between the enduring values of the antique past and those of the Soviet present is evoked once more in order to demonstrate the ephemeral nature of the Stalinist evil, and nature again plays its part in this battle. Another significant connection between *Khranitel' drevnostei* and the second novel is the grotesque quality of certain events that occur in the course of the narrative. The combination of the familiar and strange which characterizes episodes from the first novel is again apparent here. This combination is most plainly demonstrated in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* in Kalmykov's painting of the Alma-Atinka river. Although Zybin, when he looks at the painting, immediately recognizes the river, there is something about the way in which it is presented that troubles him. It takes him a week before he finally pinpoints the cause of his confusion. He says:

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[11] Woodward, "Cosmic", p. 907.
[12] Ibid..

> Kalmykov had painted the Earth. The Earth in general. An alien, as yet uninhabited planet. A receptacle for wild, unbalanced forces. It didn't matter that there were boys there and that they were swimming and sun-bathing – the river had nothing to do with them; it had its own cosmic meaning, its own goal, and it was fulfilling it with the calm persistence of all inert matter. ... This was the Alma-Atinka, seen from the haziness of Andromeda (p. 78).

This depiction of the Alma-Atinka is clearly grotesque, as it encompasses both the familiar image of the river and a mysterious vision of it. The river is depicted in this way throughout both *Khranitel' drevnostei* and *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*: it is alternately a pleasant place for bathing and a confluence of strange forces. The first suggestion of the sinister nature of the river occurs in *Khranitel' drevnostei*, immediately before the introduction of Mikhail Stepanovich, the undercover NKVD officer. Zybin describes how the river "boiled along between the narrow banks, sending up fountains of green water. Whirlpools and little waves swirled around the bigger stones, and in the very middle, around a huge rock as black and smooth as a kneeling Behemoth, whirled wisps of angry froth, leaves and rubbish".[13] The reference to the Biblical Behemoth adds to the sense of the impending struggle between Good and Evil in which Mikhail and Zybin play opposing roles.

The ambivalence of the river in *Khranitel' drevnostei* is again exemplified when Zybin and Potapov make their way to town with the dead "boa constrictor". As they walk along the banks of the Alma-Atinka, Zybin notes the changes in the river. He notes how the "tame city river" suddenly becomes "dark, tense" and drones "fiercely", and the sense of malevolence is heightened through the reference to two boulders in the river as the "Scylla and Charybdis of this place".[14]

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[13] *Sobr. soch.*, IV, p. 130.
[14] *Ibid.* p. 261.

In *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* the role of the river as harbinger of evil is underlined in the episodes leading up to Kornilov's betrayal by Kutorga. The ominous references to the never-ending rains and the rising level of water (pp. 288, 328) evoke not only the Biblical deluge but also the Styx. The mythological Cerberus, mentioned earlier in the text (p. 200), is invoked here in the form of the dog which sits outside Kornilov's tent howling every night (p. 328), while Kornilov himself thinks how appropriate it is that the Styx is "not a precipice, nor a grave, nor a hole, but simply a leaden, grey, flowing river" (p. 375).

Dombrovskii's representation of the Alma-Atinka is thus obviously grotesque inasmuch as it shows the river alternately as a natural phenomenon and as a manifestation of the evil forces that are permeating the city of Alma-Ata in 1937. But the grotesque also assumes other forms in the novel. The physical deficiencies displayed by the characters are one example. In their analyses of the genre both Thomson and Kayser identify the physically abnormal as an important element of the grotesque. Kayser mentions in this connection the paintings of Velasquez with their cripples, monsters and dwarves,[15] while Thomson demonstrates the "strong affinity" between the grotesque and physical deformity by reference to the works of Kafka and Beckett.[16] It is no accident, therefore, that Dombrovskii's bi-partite novel contains numerous references to dwarves and monsters. Thus, the "smiling dwarves"[17] on the poster that Zybin finds in a box of slides in *Khranitel' drevnostei*, anticipate the reference to Hitler and his cohorts as "dwarves" in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* (p. 123). As this description of the Nazis suggests, the references to physical abnormality in Dombrovskii's novel also serve as an indication of moral inadequacy. Thus, one of the men who comes to

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[15] Kayser, p. 18.
[16] Thomson, pp. 8-9.

arrest Zybin has bowlegs (p. 130); the NKVD officer Neiman is short, with "fleshy African lips" (p. 309); and Guliaev, another NKVD operative, is referred to as a "runt" (p. 198). This connection between physical deformity and moral deficiencies is first made, we may remember, in *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom*, where the leading Nazi is referred to throughout as a "dwarf".

Another feature of the grotesque which recurs in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* is the blurring of the dividing line between different categories, such as the living and the dead, the human and the animal. The combination of human and animal traits, for instance, is used by Dombrovskii to underline the inhumanity of those characters who are most closely associated with the Stalinist regime. Thus, Guliaev, the NKVD colonel, is nicknamed "Polecat" by his officers (p. 411) and is described as having a "marmoset-like" face (p. 556). Both Neiman and the officer who comes to arrest Zybin have "mouse-like" eyes (pp. 309, 131), and the doctor involved in the plan to use the blood of tortured prisoners is said to have "dirty, monkey-like paws" (p. 616).

Despite the obvious similarities with *Khranitel' drevnostei*, there are two features which make *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* unique in the body of Dombrovskii's fiction. The first is the portrait of Stalin which appears on its pages, and the second is the detailed examination of the story of Christ's Passion. These distinctive features add to the novel's philosophical depth, and form the basis for Dombrovskii's final judgement on the Stalinist evil.

The key to Dombrovskii's analysis of the Terror is to be found in the novel's concluding paragraph. As the artist Kalmykov paints the melancholy triumverate of Zybin, Kornilov and the former NKVD officer

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[17] *Sobr. soch*, IV, p. 90.

Neiman, the omniscient narrative voice places this scene and the events which have led up to it within the context of history. We read:

> This entire unhappy story took place in the fifty-eighth year from the birth of the leader of peoples Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin and in the one thousand, nine hundred and thirty-seventh year from the birth of Christ – a hot, inauspicious year that was pregnant with the terrible future (p. 628).

The drawing together of Stalin and Christ, or "the protagonist of darkness" and "the protagonist of light", as Cathala refers to them,[18] in this concluding statement encapsulates the nature of the battle that has taken place in the novel. For in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* Dombrovskii redefines the conflict between Zybin and the Stalinist regime as a Biblical struggle between Good and Evil. While Stalin emerges in the course of this struggle as a false Christ, it is Zybin, the erstwhile "keeper of antiquities", who takes on the mantle of the "true" Christ.

This Biblical redefinition of Zybin's battle with the authorities is first suggested in the course of one of his dreams involving Stalin. Dreaming about two lines from a Pushkin poem about Kuteikin (a character in Denis Fonvizin's comedy *Nedorosl'*), Zybin comes to the following conclusion. He thinks:

> For any sensible-minded person, Kuteikin is superior to Christ, for Christ is a myth, while Kuteikin does actually exist. He is the truth! And like every truth he demands man in his entirety, body and soul. The search is over. The world has waited for Christ and instead here comes along Christ-Kuteikin, and history has entered into a new phase. And do you know, he really has something of the superhuman about him. Yet I don't believe in him, and for that reason I am subject not to contempt, but to extermination. (p. 121)

The emergence of Zybin as the "true" Christ, in opposition to Stalin's "Christ-Kuteikin", is confirmed by the subsequent parallels drawn

between him and Christ. Kim, for example, has noted that Zybin is about thirty years old, the age at which Christ started his ministry,[19] while Woodward comments on the evocation of the Crucifixion in Tamara Dolidze's interrogation of Zybin.[20]

The Christ story: *Sud nad Khristom.*

The most obvious parallels between Zybin and Christ, however, emerge in the course of the discussions which take place between Kornilov and Kutorga. The starting point for their discussions is a manuscript written by Kutorga on the subject of Christ and the Crucifixion, entitled *Sud nad Khristom.* Recounting the content of this manuscript, Kornilov tells the authorities of Christ's resourcefulness while under interrogation. "He would give an sharp rebuff to the most provocative questions," Kornilov tells them (p. 319). This statement could just as easily be applied to Zybin, for he is equally adept at outmanoeuvring the authorities. For instance, when the NKVD threaten to bring in his lover, Lina, for interrogation, he neutralizes the threat by expressing the firm wish that they do just that; he would then at least know she was safe from the advances of other men (p. 421). Similarly, he refuses to confess to any crime; he tells the authorities that if he has to do their job for them, he expects to be "receive a wage" for it (p. 391).

The parallel between Christ and Zybin is further extended by the conflict they both experience between a genuinely profound love of life and the demands of conscience. Kutorga reveals how Christ's affirmation that he was the Son of God effectively sealed his fate; had he answered the question negatively or even vaguely, he would have been released (p. 345). The reason why he refuses to compromise is because life, for him, is a "joy,

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[18] Cathala, p. 446.
[19] See Kim, p. 68.
[20] See Woodward, "Cosmic", p. 903

a feat and not a torment", to use Kutorga's words (p. 346). Jesus knew that if he had negotiated his freedom, his life would have been devalued by the knowledge that he'd failed his duty to mankind. Zybin has a similar approach to life. He revels in the beauty he finds in nature and women, but he too is not prepared to buy life at any cost. Like Christ he is offered an escape from his situation. He can, as his cellmate Buddo suggests, confess to being a Bohemian and get himself acquitted (p. 213), but he does not wish to buy his freedom in this way as his life would be tainted afterwards. As he says to Buddo, he is afraid more than anything else of "losing peace of mind". He adds:

> Everything else I will somehow or other survive, but that would surely be the end of me, the death of me! I am not at all certain that I will get out of here, but if I do, then ... I will live quietly, in my own way, without fearing that they still have something on me (p. 261).

For him, as for Jesus, life is too precious to be bought at a cheap price.

The most obvious parallel between Christ and Zybin, however, is that they both suffer as a result of perverted justice. As Kim states, in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* Dombrovskii presents "two illegal interrogations and trials of different time and place: that of Jesus by Pilate two thousand years ago in Jerusalem, and that of an innocent museum curator in 1937 in Alma-Ata".[21] The illegality of the procedures adhered to in the trial of Christ is emphasized, particularly in the second appendix to the novel. Here Dombrovskii ennumerates the violations of the legal code that led to Jesus's crucifixion. He reveals that in Judaic law there was no provision for prosecution by the State; a trial could only be brought about by witnesses (p. 650). During the first interrogation of Christ by Annas, however, there were no witnesses, probably, we read, because they hadn't had time to

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[21] Kim, p. 168.

"prepare" them (p. 650). The various provisions made for protecting the accused are also mentioned. For example, it was forbidden not only to beat a suspect, but also to restrict his freedom of speech or movement (p. 651). The treatment meted out to Jesus thus contravened the law from the outset.

The most serious violations of the law in the case of Christ, however, were committed by the Sanhedrin. Dombrovskii reveals that this body had already been stripped of the right to implement capital punishment at the time that it condemned Jesus to death (p. 653). Additionally it wasn't supposed to sit either before dawn or after sunset and was prohibited from judging important business on the eve of Saturdays or holidays (p. 653). The judgement of Christ, which took place the evening before the feast of the Passover, was thus clearly illegal.

Zybin's treatment at the hands of the Soviet legal system is similarly unjust. He is repeatedly beaten, tortured and pressured into making a confession. The difference between the two cases, however, is that whereas Jesus's fate is presented as a singular aberration in an otherwise fair system, Zybin's is seen as common practice. For Christ, all the mechanisms that were in place to protect the accused temporarily broke down; in the case of Zybin, such mechanisms do not exist at all. In the Soviet Union of the 1930s even people who "hanker after your floor space", as Buddo puts it, could put you behind bars (p. 333). In ancient Jerusalem, on the other hand, anyone suspected of being an enemy of the accused was forbidden from standing as witness against him (p. 654). A similar contrast with Soviet practice is evoked when it is revealed that in Jerusalem a man was not supposed to be condemned to death on the testimony of just one witness or on the basis of his own confession (p. 656).

The corruption of Soviet law is effectively highlighted by means of the comparison with that of ancient Judea. The extent of this corruption is demonstrated by the reaction of the NKVD officers to Kutorga's account of

Christ's trial. Khripushin claims that one of the main points to emerge from the manuscript is that Christ was tried "humanely" (p. 325). Lieutenant Surovtsev, on the other hand, is amused that a body which sentences just one man to death in seven years should be labelled the "bloody Sanhedrin" (p. 318). It is thus suggested that, although both Christ and Zybin are victims of perverted justice, Zybin's tragedy is being repeated on a scale unknown in the time of Christ.

The prominence given to the Christ story in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* is due to a large extent to the treatment that it receives in *Master i Margarita*, which was first published in 1966. Dombrovskii regarded the Jerusalem chapters in this novel as Bulgakov's "highest achievement",[22] and their influence can be clearly discerned in Dombrovskii's own reworking of the Passion. In both cases the source of Pilate's hatred of the Jews, as Gourg has noted, is traced back to the their sabotaging of an aqueduct and their refusal to display images of Caesar in Jerusalem.[23] More obviously, however, both novels give dramatized accounts of Pilate's interrogation of Christ. In *Master i Margarita* this encounter dominates chapter 2 and is narrated by a character as seemingly untrustworthy as Kutorga: the devil-like figure Woland.[24] Dombrovskii's version is much shorter, spanning only a page and a half, and does not develop the personalities of the interlocutors. The element of theatricality is more pronounced here as the dialogue is set out like a script, replete with stage directions (pp. 349-51). These stage directions apply almost exclusively to Pontius Pilate. He is seen "grinning and shrugging his shoulders", asking questions "insistently" and "with a peevish smile" (p. 349). As a result, his actions appear to be

[22] See Anisimov and Emtsev, p. 699.
[23] M. Gourg, "Dombrovskij commentateur de la Legende du Grand Inquisiteur dans la Faculte de l'Inutile", *Dostoevsky Studies*, VIII, 1987, p. 162.
[24] M. Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, in *Romany*, Moscow, 1988, pp. 383 - 749. All subsequent references are to this edition.

premeditated and artificial, especially when he comes to wash his hands of the matter in front of the crowd (p. 351).

There are other similarities between the two presentations of the Passion. The account of Christ's interrogation is, for example, read aloud by Kutorga from his manuscript, just as in *Master i Margarita* a section of the Master's story about Pilate is read out by the eponymous heroine.[25] Kim notes how both novels thus contain an extraneous narrative that is integrated into the text,[26] while Gourg points to the similarity between the account in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* and Ivan Karamazov's "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor": both stories are related orally but are drawn from a written text.[27]

One of the central issues in Bulgakov's Christ story which Dombrovskii also addresses is that of Pilate's motives for wanting Jesus to be released. In *Master i Margarita* Caiaphas, the High Priest, attacks Pilate for his "terrible hatred" of the Jews.[28] Revealing Pilate's real reasons for wanting the release of Christ, he says: "You wanted to release him so that he could stir up the people, curse our faith and deliver the people to your Roman swords".[29] Dombrovskii similarly highlights Pilate's dislike of the Jewish people and his possible ulterior motives for wanting Christ's release. The Procurator's "hatred of the Jews" is cited as one of the qualifications that won him the job (p. 351), while his desire to see Jesus at liberty again is attributed not only to his reluctance to please the Jews by condemning to death a man that they wished to see punished, but also to the fact that Christ suited him in a number of ways, as Kutorga makes clear. He preached against violent struggles and revolutions, instructed his followers to love their enemies, of which Pilate

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[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 658-88.
[26] Kim, p. 166.
[27] Gourg, p. 163.
[28] *Master i Margarita*, p. 412.
[29] *Ibid.*.

certainly was one, and he tried to undermine the authorities such as the Sanhedrin which posed a threat to the Roman Empire. Dombrovskii thus draws on Bulgakov's depiction of Pilate as a Jew-hater and develops the idea that the Procurator had a hidden agenda for wanting Jesus's release.

Bulgakov's obvious influence on Dombrovskii's reworking of Christ's Crucifixion is reaffirmed by the striking textual similarities between the depiction of Golgotha in *Master i Margarita* and the scene in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* which depicts the ascent of Zybin and Lina to a cemetery. In Bulgakov's novel Matthew the Levite is shown sitting on the rocky side of Golgotha watching the Crucifixion. The terrain here is "rough and jagged, with gulleys and fissures", vultures circle overhead, and reference is made to a "half-crushed dog's skull" lying on the "yellow" earth.[30] In Dombrovskii's novel Lina and Zybin struggle up the rocky hillside, grabbing hold of bushes to help pull themselves up. The bird of prey in this scene is not a vulture but a red-footed falcon that watches them with "yellow eyes", and in the course of their climb they pass the skeleton of a dog (p. 221). Moreover, the "blinding dazzle" of the sun on Mark Muribellum's silver armoury[31] is paralleled by Dombrovskii's references to the "unbearable" gleam of the sea (p. 221), and in both novels the sky suddenly darkens when the sun is hidden by a cloud.[32]

As suggested by the prominence of the story of Christ's Passion in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, the theme of betrayal is central to the novel. In the course of the work Kornilov, Zybin's colleague and apparent protégé, betrays both himself and Zybin. The note of foreboding is struck when Kutorga and Kornilov discuss Judas. Kornilov asks the priest if he could forgive Judas. He replies:

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[30] *Master i Margarita*, pp. 542-3.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 542.

> Why not? For who was Judas? A man who vastly overestimated his strength. He took on a burden that was beyond him and he collapsed beneath it. It is an eternal lesson for us all, weak and fragile as we are. Don't seize a boulder bigger than you can carry, don't act the hero in vain. Three quarters of traitors are failed martyrs (p. 286).

In the course of the novel Kornilov seems to perform this role of "failed martyr". In *Khranitel' drevnostei* he had appeared to be a close ally of Zybin. Like the "keeper", he is erudite and has a hatred of the Stalinist regime. He also seems at first to be a man of integrity, as his support of Zybin against the librarian Aiupova suggests. In *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, however, his weaknesses become apparent. He admits to Potapov that when he was arrested on a previous occasion he had "scribbled a signature" on everything that was put before him (p. 273), and in the course of the novel we watch his Kafkaesque transformation from a man who had seemed, intially, to be Zybin's "double"[33] into "Gadfly", the NKVD informer.

The notion that we are meant to view Kornilov as a failed version of the Christ-like Zybin is reinforced by two passages in the novel. The first occurs when he gets hopelessly drunk and is confined to his bed. In what can be read as a parody of Christ's resurrection, he gets up on the "third day" (p. 329). The second passage occurs after his arrest on the basis of Kutorga's evidence. Realizing that he is no longer a free man, he sits on the corridor floor in despair. Dombrovskii describes him in the following way: "He leaned against the floor with his hand, got up, stretched himself, flattened himself against the wall, flung his head back, and put his hands in the position of someone being crucified [*raspial ruki*]" (p. 372). Kornilov's assumption here of the position of Christ on the cross clearly demonstrates his failed martyrdom.

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[32] Bulgakov, p. 547; Dombrovskii, p. 221.
[33] Latynina, p. 4. Cf. Gastev, p. 6; Ivanova, p. 94.

In spite of initial appearances to the contrary, however, he does not play Judas to Zybin's Christ. The role-model that Dombrovskii introduces for him is the secret second betrayer of Christ who is mentioned in the Apocrypha. The parallel with the second traitor is suggested by the scene in which Kornilov tells Potapov's niece, Dasha, that he would love to know who this man was and how he lived afterwards (p. 379). As he himself exclaims, it is the "open traitors who hang themselves, not the secret ones – no, they live!" (p. 380). Whereas Judas's suicide, therefore, can be seen as the result of a tormented conscience, the less scrupulous second traitor overcame his doubts and continued to live as normal. Kornilov is thus much closer to this second betrayer than he is to Judas; he repents of "nothing at all" (p. 375) and simply continues his life as an undercover police informer.

To Kornilov's role as a "failed martyr" corresponds that of Kutorga as a man at odds with himself. Marianne Gourg notes how he acts as a "spokesman" for the utilitarianism of the power of the State with his assertion that "it is better that one man dies than that the whole nation perish".[34] At the same time, however, he emphasizes the uniqueness of the individual. For example, in discussing Seneca, he contrasts the reality of "the naked man on the naked earth" with the unreality of the State which is "only a concept" (p. 289). He reiterates the point when he says that Adam was created unique so as to demonstrate that "whoever destroys a soul destroys the world and whoever saves an innocent man saves the whole of humankind" (p. 341). The source of Kutorga's obvious ambivalence is indicated by Dombrovskii in a letter to Sergei Tkhorzhevskii. The reason for Kutorga's struggle with himself, he says, is that his soul has been "cut by a hachet into two halves" by the Stalinist regime.[35] This "dualism of the

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[34] Gourg, p. 164.
[35] See Tkhorzhevskii, p. 195.

soul", as he terms it, has created an unbridgeable gulf within Kutorga. The contradiction between Kutorga's belief in the importance of the individual and his arguments in favour of utilitarian power can thus be seen as an expression of this spiritual dichotomy.

Kutorga's ambivalence is captured, as Gourg notes, in the statuette of Don Quixote given to him by his father. This bust is a highly unusual depiction of Cervantes's hero: although he has the customary moustache and beard, he is laughing demonically and sticking his tongue out. Dombrovskii describes him in the following way: "He was full of venom and malice. He was jubilant. He was satanically exulting over someone. And he was no longer the knight of the Sad Countenance, but the devil, Beelzebub, Satan himself. It was Don Quixote changing instantaneously before one's eyes into Mephistopheles" (p. 333). The yoking together of Quixote and the devil highlights the confused morality of Kutorga and Kornilov; both have good intentions, yet end up serving the corrupt regime. In this way Dombrovskii reveals how a "substitution of good by evil"[36] is almost imperceptibly taking place during the Stalinist Terror.

The symbiosis between good and evil represented in this statuette is also noted by Kornilov. As he looks at this diabolic Don Quixote, he wonders aloud whether people like John Huss and Francis of Assisi did actually bring good into the world, or whether they merely prompted a backlash of evil. He says that after them came "misfortune, murder, madness; after the holy Francis – the holy Inquisition. After Huss – the Hussian wars. In a word, after martyrs always come executioners" (p. 333). This notion of good and evil as two sides of one coin re-emerges at the end of the novel when we are told, as we look at Neiman and Kornilov, that their existence would not have been possible without the third person sitting alongside them – namely Zybin (p. 627).

36 Maksimov and Geller, p. 22

The conflict between good and evil which is a common theme in the previous novels is thus given an added dimension here. The distinctive nature of its interpretation in the work is highlighted by the comments ascribed to the artist Kalmykov. Talking about an exhibit that Kalmykov is preparing for the museum, Zybin notes the way in which all sense of perspective has been destroyed in the composition. Kalmykov praises Zybin's perspicacity. He says:

> You have noted this very well. Here I have destroyed time ... I have disturbed the balance of angles and lines, and one only has to disturb them for them to be lengthened to infinity. Can you picture to yourself what a point is? ... A point is the zero state of an infinite number of concentric circles, some of which extend under one sign around the circle, while the others extend under the opposite sign from the zero circle inward. A point can be even the size of the cosmos (p. 74).

History is similarly presented in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* as an "infinite number" of concentric circles; good, represented "under one sign", moves in circles in one direction, while evil, under the "opposite sign", moves in circles in the other direction. The image of the circle used here is carried over into the rest of the novel. For instance, in the course of his dream about the Black Sea Zybin recalls meeting a man called Roman. As he sits by the water's edge throwing pebbles into the sea, this man tells Zybin that "when you throw stones into the water, be sure to follow the circles they make, otherwise the exercise will be meaningless" (p. 139). Turkov has noted the association between Zybin's name and the word *zyb'*, meaning "ripple",[37] and this connection, coupled with the later revelation that the man throwing pebbles is none other than the NKVD interrogator Shtern, should be viewed in the light of Kalmykov's remarks and their meaning. Here Dombrovskii brings

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[37] Turkov, p. 227.

together two representatives of the opposing "signs" of Good and Evil and shows how they are both caught in the unceasing circles of history.

Another reference to circles occurs in the course of Zybin's final interrogation. He tells Tamara how the evil the NKVD is creating is "spreading in circles around the whole world" (p. 563). This once again demonstrates the idea of the ebb and flow of Good and Evil in circular motion. Whilst the ripples of Good emanate from Zybin, the ripples of evil wash back in the opposite direction from Stalin and his associates.

The portrait of Stalin

At first glance, the significance of the role of Stalin in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* seems somewhat limited, as the total space devoted to him as a character is only about fifteen pages (although he also appears in Zybin's dreams and hallucinations). The brevity of this portrait, however, belies its importance in the novel. Dombrovskii felt that without a portrait of Stalin the "general picture in the book would be incomplete".[38] Its inclusion in the work certainly enhances our understanding of the author's stance on the Stalinist Terror, as we will see.

The formal connection between the "Stalin passages" and the rest of the novel is made via the Georgian prisoner Georgii Matveevich Kalandarashvili. Kalandarashvili briefly shares a cell with Zybin, and he tells him the story about how he once did Stalin a favour in 1904, when they were both exiles. Before Stalin was moved on to Yeniseisk, Kalandarashvili lent him fifty roubles, a bearskin fur-coat and some *valenki* (p. 482). Now, in his hour of need, he has written to Stalin asking him to return the favour (p. 484). The assumption is that by writing such a letter Kalandarashvili has effectively signed his own death warrant, and

38 See Tkhorzhevskii, p. 198

as Zybin watches him being led from the cell, he mentally pays his respects to this good man (p. 487).

It is later revealed, however, that Kalandarashvili has been released, and the "Stalin passages" demonstrate how such an extraordinary turn of events came to pass. In the first passage reference is made to Beria handing over a letter to Stalin from a certain prisoner. At this stage we have not been introduced to Kalandarashvili and are therefore unaware of the significance of this action, but with hindsight it becomes apparent why Stalin was in a "good mood" for the subsequent part of the day (p. 397). The second passage informs us what happened a week before Kalandarashvili's release. As Stalin sits working in his garden, a messenger arrives with Kalandarashvili's files. The *Vozhd'* examines these documents and manages to come up with a justifiable excuse for releasing his former fellow exile (p. 544).

As is evident from this benevolent gesture, the Stalin portrayed in the novel is shown to be very human. We see him performing ordinary, everyday tasks, such as sleeping (p. 396), having breakfast, reading the papers and walking through the garden (pp. 397, 399). He enjoys good Georgian wine (p. 396) and has simple tastes. For example, we learn that he loved plain furniture, as he "generally loved everything that was simple, of good quality and comfortable" (p. 400). He also loves nature. Both passages show him in the grounds of his *dacha* on the outskirts of Moscow. In the first instance he is seen walking through a young birch grove, inhaling the bitter smell of the grass, the earth and the birch trees (p. 400). The second passage shows him as he sits working in the garden, now and again taking time to look at the clouds and the tops of the trees (p. 529). Sitting in the garden, Stalin thinks to himself how good it is

that the sun has come out, and when its rays fall directly onto his chair, he sits and basks for a few minutes (p. 529).

The ordinariness of Stalin's surroundings corresponds with the prosaic description of the man himself. Dombrovskii lists his unremarkable physical features, as recorded in an official document produced at the time of his arrest during the revolution. We are told that he has a "long straight nose", a "swarthy face, covered with pock-marks" and "average-sized" ears (p. 537). The only suggestion of the evil which he was subsequently to foster in the Soviet Union occurs when his two webbed toes are described as the "sign of the Anti-Christ" (p. 538), a reference which also serves to remind us of the role he plays in the novel as the "Christ Kuteikin".

Further proof of the dispassionate stance Dombrovskii takes towards Stalin can be found in his use of biographical details. Dombrovskii delves into Stalin's past in order to enhance our understanding of how events have shaped his personality. Particular attention is given to his traumatic childhood. Thus, we learn of the terrible rows between the young Dzhugashvili's parents and the fateful night when his drunken father finally absconded for good (pp. 534-5). From this night onwards, Stalin is shown to be caught in an oppressive web of secrecy. By the time he reaches the seminary, therefore, we see how he has withdrawn totally into a world of his own, a world in which "everything was subordinated to him alone" and in which he was the "most important, the most successful, handsome, cunning and clever person" (p. 536). Through reference to Stalin's biography, Dombrovskii thus charts the burgeoning egomania of a man who was later to rule the Soviet Union with such disregard for other human lives.

The objectivity of the portrait of Stalin in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* is underscored by comparison with that which appears in *V kruge pervom*.

Like Dombrovskii's depiction, the portrait which Solzhenitsyn presents is brief, spanning only five of the ninety-six chapters in his work.[39] This, however, is where the similarity ends. Whereas Dombrovskii strives to depict Stalin in dispassionate terms as a "complex human being",[40] Solzhenitsyn in contrast paints the picture of an inhuman monster.

The unremittingly negative approach Solzhenitsyn takes towards Stalin is evident from the way in which he describes his surroundings. Whereas the description of Stalin's garden in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* serves to highlight his humanity, Solzhenitsyn presents an environment designed to highlight Stalin's inhumanity. In *V kruge pervom* Stalin is shown to inhabit an artificial nether world. He lives in "closed, locked darkness"[41] in a bunker which is equipped with special air-conditioning,[42] armoured walls and bullet-proof glass.[43] As if to underline Stalin's lack of human qualities, he is shown to have an unnatural aversion to sunlight. For Stalin, we read, the most "unbearable" time of the day was morning and midday, when the "sun rose, played and reached its zenith".[44] The contrast with Dombrovskii's Stalin, who sits basking in the sunshine, is therefore evident.

The description of Stalin's appearance in *V kruge pervom* is likewise unfavourable. Through the introduction of repulsive physical details Solzhenitsyn ensures that the *Vozhd'* emerges in the novel as a decrepit "half-senile"[45] figure. Thus we are informed that Stalin's receding hair-line makes him look like a "pithecanthropus";[46]that his breath "stinks" of leaf tobacco; and that his "greasy, damp" fingers leave marks on the

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[39] The first version of the novel, which appeared in English in 1968, contained eighty-seven chapters. A revised ninety-six chapter edition appeared in 1978.
[40] R. Marsh, *Images of Dictatorship: Portraits of Stalin in literature*, London, 1989, p. 115.
[41] A. Solzhenitsyn, *V kruge pervom*, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. 1, Paris 1978, p. 121.
[42] *Ibid.*, p. 115.
[43] *Ibid.* p. 174.
[44] *Ibid.*, p. 121.
[45] A. Rothberg, *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: The Major Novels*, New York, 1971, p. 70.
[46] *V kruge pervom*, p. 170.

books and documents he reads. [47] Although Solzhenitsyn, like Dombrovskii, also delves into Stalin's biography, he does so not in an attempt to understand the psychological development of this world leader but instead to confirm him as a vain, deluded fool. He uses details from Stalin's past to expose the discrepancy between the image and reality. Thus, while Stalin regards himself as a "great soldier" and "a creator of victory"[48] we are told that in reality this young revolutionary didn't know how to roll his coat into a greatcoat roll or even how to load a rifle.[49]

The different ways in which Dombrovskii and Solzhenitsyn use details from Stalin's biography reflect the difference in their approach to the subject as a whole. Solzhenitsyn approaches Stalin with the free hand of an artist, as he himself concedes. He says:

> My view was that Stalin should reap the harvest of his secretiveness. He had lived mysteriously – so now anyone was entitled to write about him as he thought fit. The author's right, the author's duty, is to give his own picture and stimulate the reader's imagination.[50]

In contrast, Dombrovskii strives to analyse Stalin dispassionately from a historical viewpoint. Jean Cathala has commented how the "novelist has never killed the historian in Dombrovskii",[51] and his objective analysis of the *Vozhd'* is testimony to this. Even though Dombrovskii had as much reason to hate Stalin as Solzhenitsyn, having spent approximately twenty years of his life in prison or exile, he was able to put aside any personal prejudice so as to present the events of the 1930s in the Soviet Union from a historical perspective. In this respect, Dombrovskii acts like his *alter ego* Zybin; he investigates Stalinism "like an archaeologist,

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[47] *Ibid.*, p. 116.
[48] *Ibid.*, p. 135.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 131.
[50] Quoted by Marsh, p. 141.
[51] Cathala, p. 439.

painstakingly and consistently uncovering layer after layer of rock, studying the stratification".[52]

The purpose of examining Stalin in a work of art ultimately boils down to one issue: blame. The author must decide whether this mighty leader was, in fact, a calculating monster or whether he was a misguided man who was not totally responsible for the horrors that were perpetrated in his name. Dombrovskii takes the latter view. This is not to say that the portrayal of Stalin in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* is wholly favourable. On the contrary, at times his malice and ruthlessness are all too evident. For example, when he thinks of the typists and heads of prisons who have access to top-secret documents relating to the death penalty, he is not unduly worried. He thinks to himself: "For them, when the time comes, there will also be a special list" (p. 533). His impulse to destroy is similarly revealed when he looks at a photograph of the young Kalandarashvili. This picture gives him a great deal of pleasure not because of its subject matter, but because "he loved to hold in his hands such fragments of a world which he had shattered to smithereens" (p. 539). This clearly reveals the contrast between Stalin and the main character in the novel, Zybin. Whereas at the beginning of *Khranitel' drevnostei* Zybin revels in old photographs as valuable records of the past,[53] Stalin rejoices in the falling away of the old order. Where one strives to preserve, the other strives to destroy.

In spite of these negative aspects of Stalin's portrayal, however, Dombrovskii demonstrates that to a large extent he is not guilty of the terrible things that are going on around him. Indeed, he is generally ignorant of most of the acts being committed by his henchmen. Ezhov sends him lists to sign which contain such sanitized language as "the first

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[52] Anisimov and Emtsev, p. 709.
[53] *Sobr. soch.*, IV, p. 15.

category" for the death penalty. Although Stalin knows what "the first category" means, he is upset by the thought of it. He thinks: "The first category- a bullet in the back of the head. Men and women, old and young - it was a terrible business!" (p. 533). Even though it is his signature at the bottom of these forms, he is not responsible for putting the names on the list in the first place, nor is he the one who carries out the executions.

Stalin's ignorance is further revealed in his conversation with the messenger who brings Kalandarashvili's files. He recalls how during Tsarist times the daily bread ration in camp was three pounds, but he needs to ask the messenger how much it is "nowadays" (p. 541). Finally, when it comes to the question of whether to release Kalandarashvili or not, Stalin shows himself to be worried about what the Central Committee might think of this action. He says in frustration: "After all, I am not an autocrat, an All-Russian sovereign emperor; he could punish, pardon, do everything he wanted to – but I can't. Above me is the law!" (p. 542). Cathala accuses Stalin here of "playing" the part of the "legalistic statesman who regrets that he doesn't have the powers of a Tsar",[54] and this is certainly true, yet there is no textual evidence to suggest that this is just an act. Rather, he is depicted as a misguided figurehead who is genuinely oblivious of the heinous crimes that his officials are carrying out on his behalf.

Dombrovskii thus attempts to show that, while Stalin was not free from guilt, he was not wholly responsible for the dreadful events of the 30s and 40s. Anisimov and Emtsev have noted that the overall message of the novel is that "you cannot heap all the troubles on Stalin alone".[55] This is plainly the idea which emerges from the portrait of Stalin. Dombrovskii

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[54] Cathala, p. 437.
[55] Anisimov and Emtsev, p. 694.

makes it clear that while Stalin sits signing papers, it is someone else who is putting that bullet into the back of a prisoner's head.

Stylistic features of *Fakul'tet nenuznykh veshchei*

Although *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* has much in common with *Khranitel' drevnostei*, there is one difference between the two which becomes immediately apparent from the first few pages. This difference is the change of narrative perspective. The events are now no longer related from the perspective of the "keeper of antiquities" but are instead described from an omniscient perspective. This enables Dombrovskii, as Piskunov has noted, to look at the world "through the eyes of all of his characters in turn".[56] The result is a "polyphonic" novel in which the narrative is developed in a "continual switch between points of view".[57] We are thus presented with differing interpretations of events, from Kornilov's justification for his collaboration with the police to Stalin's own thoughts on the Terror. The third-person narration in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* thus lends to Dombrovskii's account of the events a greater degree of objectivity than would have been possible with the first-person form. As Kim states, in the novel the narrator "endeavours to describe the events surrounding Zybin from a distance and to present the terror in objective and universal terms from a broad historical perspective".[58] This "broad historical perspective" is further achieved through the references to the ancient past, and to Roman history in particular.

On a stylistic level we see in the novel the development of features that are readily recognisable from the previous fiction. Most noteworthy in

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[56] Piskunov, Piskunova, p. 178.
[57] Ibid..
[58] Kim, p. 54. Cf. Shtokman, p. 99.

this respect is the use of textual echoes. When we learn that Lina's nickname is "Goat", because of the way she trots about in her high heels (p. 24), the detail seems unimportant, but it is illuminated by two significant references in the course of the bi-partite novel. The first occurs at the end of *Khranitel' drevnostei*, when Rodionov sings a macabre lullaby about a goat.. The song records how this creature wanders lost in a forest, before it is finally devoured by a wolf.[59] Hassanoff, has interpreted this song as summing up the "basic situation" of the characters in the novel. She says that "some are like goats, some are like wolves, but they all wander in the darkness, all are lonely, lost, afraid and desperate".[60] Her association of the victims with the goat in the lullaby is certainly valid and is reinforced by the reference in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* to an ancient diadem which depicts a fearsome dragon baring its teeth over a little goat which is standing beneath it (p. 31). The scene is clearly a symbolic representation of the way in which Lina is subsequently oppressed by the authorities, and it underlines her helplessness.

Other textual echoes in the novel serve to reinforce the image that emerges of Zybin as a latter-day Christ figure. The comparison of the NKVD interrogator Khripushin to a bull (p. 231), for example, gains added significance from the later revelation that the bull is Pilate's heraldic symbol (p. 347). The textual resonance is heightened when we learn that Khripushin, like Pilate, has matters taken out of his hands, as he is taken off Zybin's case. The frequent references to palm trees in the novel similarly serve as "echoes" of Zybin's Christ-like role. The first reference occurs early in the text, when ornamental palm trees are

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[59] *Sobr. soch.*, IV, p. 280.
[60] O. Hassanoff, "Dombrovskij's *The Keeper of Antiquities*", *Melbourne Slavonic Studies*, V-VI, 1971, p. 200.

brought out of the cafes onto the pavements (p. 43). When Zybin dreams about the Black Sea bazaar, one of the items which are being hawked are stones with palms painted on them (p. 133); the living quarters of the caretaker in the graveyard which Lina and Zybin visit has windows decorated with bronze palms (p. 223); and the interior of the NKVD building is shown to be like a plush hotel with imposing staircases and "even palms" (p. 302). These frequent references to a tree that has clear Biblical connections prepare the way for the emergence of Zybin as a Christ figure.

Another textual motif is used to demonstrate the similar position in which Zybin and Kornilov find themselves. Both are overtaken by a sense of unreality in the course of being interrogated. Zybin's confused state of mind, for instance, is described in the following way: "Everything became ineffectual, stupefied – everything softly collapsed, stratified, like a pack of cards, noiselessly scattering on the glass" (p. 251). A later description of Kornilov is strikingly similar and even includes the same simile; we are told that "everything was now quivering and stratifying, like a pack of cards" (p. 282). This textual echoing serves to highlight the affinity between these two characters and to emphasize the differences between their subsequent courses of action.

Another stylistic feature of *Fakul'tet nenuznykh veshchei* which links it with the earlier fiction is the distortion of the chronology. Although the action of this 700-page novel is set over only one month in 1937, Dombrovskii's extends it by inserting frequent digressions and dream sequences. As a result the temporal and spatial frame of reference becomes extended so that, as Kim notes, the events appear "in the context of the two-thousand-year-long 'Christian era'".[61]

[61] Kim, p. 56.

This effect is, of course, heightened by the evocation of ancient Rome achieved through Kutorga's manuscript and the Zybin-Christ parallel, and by the closing paragraph of the novel which clearly places the events in just such a context.

To conclude, therefore, there is little doubt that *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* is Dombrovskii's finest literary achievement. The narrative operates on a number of levels. With its theme of missing gold, hidden treasure and its "complicated dynamic plot",[62] *Fakul'tet nenuznykh veshchei* demonstrates its affinity with the detective story element of the earlier novel *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom*. On a more philosophical level, the novel exposes the fragile nature of despotism by contrast with the immutable values of art which Zybin embodies as both "keeper of antiquities" and as a latter-day Christ: truth, justice and conscience. It is these qualities, dismissed by the Soviet regime as "unnecessary", that enable Zybin, like his literary predecessor Leon Maisonnier, to overcome the threat of the evil facing him.

The presentation of Zybin as a Christ figure amplifies the historical context of the events. For in the novel the battle between Good and Evil once more emerges as yet another instalment in the continual struggle between these two forces that has taken place since time immemorial. The textual echoes serve to highlight this historical context by drawing our attention to the link between "everything and everything else". As a result the judgement which Dombrovskii pronounces on Stalin can be nothing other than dispassionate, since he, like Zybin, emerges as merely another player in this age-old battle.

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[62] Latynina, p. 43.

Chapter 9 – Evocations of the Terror: *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, *Ischeznovenie* and *Deti Arbata*

This chapter is devoted to two comparative studies of *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* with Trifonov's *Ischeznovenie* and Rybakov's *Deti Arbata.*

Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei and *Izcheznovenie*

Dombrovskii's novel *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* is set in 1937, at the very peak of Stalin's Great Terror. Its significance as an evocation of this troubled era of Soviet history will be seen through comparisons with such novels as Iurii Trifonov's unfinished *Ischeznovenie*[1] and Rybakov's trilogy which commences with *Deti Arbata.*[2]

Our first task is to identify the common features that *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* shares with Trifonov's work. To begin with, the history behind the two novels is remarkably similar. Like Dombrovskii's work, *Ischeznovenie* was published posthumously, during the years of *glasnost'*.[3] The novels were also written over similarly extended periods. Just as Dombrovskii laboured for over a decade on his *magnum opus*, Trifonov spent the best part of twenty years working on *Ischeznovenie.*[4]

It is the subject matter of the two novels, however, that connects them the most closely, as both deal with the period of the late 1930s in the Soviet Union. Dombrovskii's work depicts the trials and tribulations of the archaeologist Zybin when he is arrested and imprisoned in Alma-Ata in 1937. *Ischeznovenie* is concerned with Igor' Baiukov, the son of a

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[1] Iu. Trifonov, *Ischeznovenie* in *Otblesk kostra*, Moscow, 1988, pp. 147-300. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent references to Trifonov's works in this chapter are to this edition, and page numbers are entered in the text.

[2] A. Rybakov, *Deti Arbata*, Moscow, 1987. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent references to Rybakov's works in this chapter are to this edition, and page numbers are entered in the text.

[3] Trifonov died suddenly in 1981, at the age of fifty-five; *Ischeznovenie* was published six years later.

[4] Ol'ga Trifonova-Miroshnichenko asserts that her late husband worked on the novel from the late 1950s to the 1970s. See Nina Kolesnikoff, *Yury Trifonov: A Critical Study*, Michigan, 1991, p. 123.

disgraced Party official. The novel tells of his experiences in Moscow as a youth of nearly seventeen, although frequent flashbacks allow us to see him and his family as they were when he was just eleven.

Both works contain a considerable amount of autobiographical material. The connections between Zybin and his creator have already been considered in previous chapters; similar links may be found between Trifonov and Igor', or Gorik, as he is affectionately known. Trifonov's father, a Cossack by origin, enjoyed an illustrious career during the Civil War, but by 1937 he had fallen foul of the authorities and was arrested. This is the last that is known of him. Following the subsequent arrest of his mother, the young Trifonov (he was only eleven years old when his father was arrested) was adopted by his maternal grandmother, T. A. Slovatinskaia. He was evacuated to Tashkent in 1941 and later returned to Moscow to work as a labourer and fitter in a factory making radiators for warplanes. His career as a writer began with his admission to the Gor'kii Literary Institute, although his place at this prestigious establishment was only secured because he lied about his parents on the enrolment forms.

Much of this information is transferred directly to Gorik Baiukov. Gorik's parents are both arrested and, although little is known about what has happened to his father, his mother still writes to him from prison camp (p. 242). Like Trifonov, Gorik is evacuated to Tashkent, returning to Moscow to work in a factory making radiators for warplanes. It is worth noting that Gorik only succeeded in getting this job by hiding the truth about the fate of his parents (p. 176). Similarly, just as Trifonov's father is a Cossack with a glowing Civil War record, so Gorik's father is a distinguished veteran and a "genuine Don Cossack" (p. 297).

Trifonov's widow Ol'ga highlighted the autobiographical elements of *Ischeznovenie* when she likened it to a diary or notebook in which a

writer records his most important thoughts and observations.[5] For all its autobiographical elements, however, the work is still primarily a work of fiction, and Trifonov uses several literary devices to convey to the reader the prevailing fear and uncertainty of the Purge years. One of the most significant ways in which he communicates these feelings is through dislocating the chronology of the work. Flashbacks in particular are used to achieve this effect. Thus, although in the narrative present Ivan is a youth of almost seventeen, there are lengthy passages which take us back to when he was just eleven. For example, a dream he has about an old apartment prompts a flashback which details the idyllic family life the Baiukovs used to enjoy (pp. 154-163). When Igor' accidentally misspells a word on a banner he has been asked to produce, it brings back memories of a similar incident in his childhood, when he misspelt a word in his exhibit for the school Pushkin competition (p. 184), and a long flashback about the events of that time likewise ensues.

The flashbacks are so extensive that the reader easily becomes confused between the narrative past and the narrative present. The final fifty pages of the book, for instance, consist of one extended flashback, and it is difficult to remind oneself that the Nikolai Baiukov featuring so prominently in the action is now, in all probability, a dead man. It is only the novel's closing sentence – "But it was many years ... [before Igor' could forget an embarrassing childhood incident]" (p. 300) – that breaks the spell of the flashback and reminds us of the narrative present. Indeed, this sentence, which restores the sense of time and reminds the reader of the narrative present, contributes largely to the sense of unity which critics have seen in this unfinished novel.[6]

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[5] See Kolesnikoff, p. 123.

[6] David Gillespie, in his study *Iurii Trifonov: Unity through Time* (Cambridge, 1992) writes that the novel has a "curious unity" (p. 180), while Kolesnikoff states that although the novel is unfinished it nevertheless displays "a very coherent temporal and narrative structure" (p. 126).

The sense of disorientation which the reader experiences as a result of the alternation between past and present is intensified by the changes of narrative voice. David Gillespie identifies multiple narrative viewpoints as being one of the characteristics of Trifonov's prose, and *Ischeznovenie* is certainly no exception in this respect.[7] The novel opens with two paragraphs narrated in the first-person, yet immediately after this there is a switch to a third-person point of view (pp. 148-9). This transition from first- to third- person narration is made all the more abrupt by the accompanying change of subject matter: whereas the opening two paragraphs involve a monologue about a house in which the narrator once lived, the subsequent description, related in the third-person, is of a station in Central Asia.

The rest of the narrative is not, however, related simply from an omniscient viewpoint. The thoughts of the leading characters frequently creep into the narrative flow. When Igor' is summoned to see his supervisor at the factory, we are allowed to see directly into his mind as he fears that the truth about his parents has been discovered:

> Igor' was suddenly seized by a sense of alarm. The one and only explanation comprehensible to him [for being summoned] was that it was something to do with the questionnaire – they'd discovered, found out ... A strange indifference replaced his alarm. He walked without hurrying along the planked walkways of the second floor, slapped his hand on the iron handrail and mused calmly: "And what is there that's so special? I answered correctly. He died in such-and-such a year. They even gave me an official answer; he died from pneumonia. My mother is working in Kazakhstan in her particular profession. She is a livestock specialist. She works as a livestock specialist on a *sovkhoz*. What's peculiar about that?" (pp. 175-6)

A similar insight is given into the thoughts of Gorik's father Nikolai on his return from Arkadii Florinskii's apartment. Florinskii is a rising star

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[7] Gillespie, p. 181.

+in Ezhov's secret police department and is a typical example of the ruthless new breed of official. Nikolai's sense of his impending doom is clearly voiced in this passage:

> He thought of how many houses there had been in his life, beginning with Temernik, Saratov, Yekaterinburg, and then Osypki, Petersburg, Line Fourteen, Moscow and the "Metropol'", sleeper carriages, Helsingfors on Albertsgatan, Dairen, God knows where else, but nowhere had there been a home, it was all vague, had sloped off here, Liza and the children, life coming to a close, it has to come about sometime, for it is after all on behalf of it, on behalf of this feeling that revolutions are made, but suddenly it had seemed to him with momentary and insane force that this pyramid of comfort shining forth in the night, this lampshade-like tower of Babylon was also temporary, was also cast up in the air, like dust on the wind. Residents switch off the lights in the rooms and, delighting in the darkness, fly off somewhere into another, even larger, room. This is what occurred for a second to Nikolai Grigor'evich before he went to bed, as he stood by the window. (p. 203)

Nikolai's insecurity is expressed here as a form of rootlessness, and this is one of the main ways in which Trifonov communicates the atmosphere of uncertainty. His son Igor' is similarly affected. When he receives his first pay-packet, for instance, his satisfaction is diminished by his yearning for "home". He realises that "that place where he'd be in an hour, that wasn't his home. There were good people, warm-hearted people there, but it was their home and his home was somewhere else in another place" (p. 235). The only place in which Igor' is shown to enjoy a degree of security is the *dacha* in Serebrianyi bor. Even here, however, the cosiness of family life is by no means inviolable. As Gillespie says, "the realities of the adult world increasingly encroach upon Igor's juvenile consciousness", as members of his family discuss the disappearance of friends, and gradually shatter his sense of security.[8]

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[8] Ibid., p. 182.

The rootlessness experienced by the Baiukovs acts as a metonymy for the general feeling of uncertainty prevalent at that time. The people's reaction to this instability is to put even more faith in the State, as Trifonov demonstrates. Even Nikolai, who has worked alongside Stalin as a colleague and is aware of his shortcomings, holds on to the belief that the events unfolding in the Soviet Union are merely a kneejerk reaction to fascism. He thinks of the rise of two ruthless officials, Florinskii and a certain Pchelintsev, and concludes:

> No, a single Pchelintsev doesn't decide anything. Even Arsiushka Florinskii, who was now an assistant to Ezhov ... even Arsiushka, in such a high place now, didn't mean anything as such. It seemed to Nikolai Grigor'evich that the real cause of these strange political convulsions was the fear of fascism. The influence of Hitler, doubtlessly. There were no other explanations. And what other explanation could there be? But there must be an end [to it]. (p. 285)

If a high-ranking official who fully realises Stalin's brutishness is unable to accept that he might be the perpetrator of the nightmarish events that are unfolding, what chance does the man in the street have?

The refusal of the *narod* to believe Stalin capable of such actions is exemplified by the way in which they readily embrace the most outlandish rumours. Lenia, Gorik's daredevil friend, fears that their secret cave might have been commandeered by German spies. His reasoning behind this is that Sapog's father, who has just been "unmasked" as an "enemy of the people", may have been told about the cave by his son, and he in turn would have passed the information on to the Germans (p. 257). Although concessions have to be made here, as we are dealing with boys of only eleven, the general paranoia is effectively communicated, especially as it is Lenia's own father who has filled his head with stories about a network of German spies. Lenia informs the boys of the threat that is facing them all:

> And do you know what my father said? ... Not long ago he went to Moscow for a plenary session. He saw Stalin, Voroshilov, all the leaders. And there he said that now is the hardest time, even harder than war. Because all around there are enemies. Wreckers, spies, saboteurs, double-dealers and so on. England and France, he said, were crammed full of German spies. Why then, he said, shouldn't there be any with us? We do have them, even more of them than are over there, but it is hard to unmask them because, he said, they take refuge behind party cards and past merits. On the whole they are very cunningly disguised, the vermin. (p. 257)

This passage demonstrates the widespread paranoia that gripped the Soviet Union, yet it also reveals another feature of Trifonov's novel: direct references to contemporary leaders. Frequent mention is made of men whose names have since entered the annals of history. Vyshinskii, Ezhov, Ordzhonikidze, Bukharin and, of course, Stalin all figure in the novel, although none of them actually appear as characters. The salient feature about the representation of these men is that they are viewed simply as colleagues of the Baiukovs, instead of idealized demi-gods. Stalin is the most obvious example. When Nikolai and Mikhail discuss Stalin and his Civil War record, they show not reverence for his martial greatness, but a horror of his ruthlessness. Both of them know his capabilities: "Before many other people they understood what Koba was, as he seized power. No-one else had yet suspected. But they already knew. Skulls crunched in his fist like ripe nuts that had dried out in the sun" (p. 290). This expression of Stalin's brutality contrasts sharply with the serenity of the gigantic image of him which is projected into the night sky over the Kremlin (p. 295).

Dombrovskii's novel, which similarly evokes the period of the Great Terror, has several features in common with *Ischeznovenie*. Just as Trifonov breaks up the chronology of his work to recreate in the reader a sense of the insecurity experienced by the people at that time, so

Dombrovskii too deliberately disorientates his readers by abruptly switching between dream and reality. Kim notes how the alternation between these two states creates "unique artistic effects, blurring the dividing line between the different temporal and spatial planes".[9] One of the best examples of this "blurring" effect is to be found in Part II, Chapter 1, when Zybin is dreaming about his stay at the Black Sea.[10] The chapter immediately preceding this tells of his arrest, yet the scene suddenly changes and he is inexplicably transported to a seaside resort. It is not until he finally wakes up in prison that we realise that this section all constitutes part of his dream.[11]

This technique of alternating between dream and reality recurs throughout Part II of the work. At one stage, dreams start to dominate the narrative, with the passages relating to prison life being reduced to single paragraphs.[12] This switch between dream and reality disorientates the reader but also demonstrates Zybin's inner strength; he is able to escape the world of the NKVD by retreating into his world of dreams.

Like *Ischeznovenie*, Dombrovskii's novel highlights the absurd nature of the paranoia that gripped society during the Terror. The most obvious example of this is the grass-snake in *Khranitel' drevnostei* which becomes transformed into a "boa-constrictor", thanks to the hysteria generated by the press. The ridiculous logic which prevailed at that time is further demonstrated in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei.* Here we have Buddo, a sixty-year old man, previously in charge of a regional fuel depot, sitting in prison accused of collaborating in the assasination of Kirov.[13] The irrational thinking behind such imprisonments is

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[9] Kim, p. 55.
[10] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Sobr. soch*, V, pp. 133-143.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 143.
[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 213-30.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 145.

demonstrated by the NKVD officer Neiman when he examines a photograph of Zybin standing in front of the National Archives. Neiman points out that this building was once inhabited by Trotskii and from this he infers that the book which Zybin is seen to be holding is a volume of Trotskii's complete works. He consequently concludes that all this adds up to a photograph showing "the apostle with the gospel!".[14]

It is not merely the thinking of the NKVD officers that is at fault here, but the legal code as well. Buddo tells Zybin that he will undoubtedly be charged according to Article 58, paragraph 10, an article which, he says, is a "universal" one which "suits everyone".[15] This statement is justified when Shtern, deciding what part of the law a religious sect had broken by lying down in a field, plumps for precisely this "universal" article.[16] Dombrovskii, like Trifonov, shows how the people are paradoxically drawn even closer to the State by the events that are going on around them. People readily believe that there are good grounds for the plethora of arrests that are taking place. For example, Potapov, the manager of the "Mountain Giant" collective farm, firmly believes that his brother must be guilty of something to have been arrested, even though he knows that the NKVD case is flawed. The museum director, Stepan Mitrofanovich, repeats what Potapov said in this connection, namely that "if Pet'ka was taken, well then, there was a reason for it".[17] This assertion calls to mind the statement made by Nikolai in *Ischeznovenie*. He says that "people believe in the guilt of others too easily – 'there must be something in it' – and are therefore too relaxed about their own person" (p. 284).

Just as the characters in Trifonov's work have unshakeable faith in Stalin, so the players in Dombrovskii's novel also demonstrate a similar

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[14] *Ibid.*, p. 419.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 146.
[16] *Ibid.* p. 451.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

trust in their leader. It is Stepan who again voices the people's belief in Stalin. He says:

> You and me, him and her, we are all capable of making mistakes, but the *Vozhd'* – never! He is not. He is the leader! He should lead, and he leads us. "From victory to victory", as it says on the walls of our institute. He is wise, great, brilliant, all-knowing, and if we all think about him like this, then we will be victorious.[18]

The people cannot allow for the possibility of Stalin making mistakes even on insignificant issues, for if this is the case, then he may well have made mistakes about really important matters.

Although *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* shares a good deal of common ground with Trifonov's work, there are certain points on which it clearly differs. The most obvious of these is the setting. As Woodward points out, the Central Asian background for Dombrovskii's novel distinguishes it from many other works about the Terror. The choice of location, he says, provides "a unique fictional confirmation that the nightmarish atmosphere of Trifonov's Moscow in the 1930s was fully replicated in the most far-flung regions of the land".[19]

It is not merely the backdrop to the novels that sets them apart. Consideration of the two central protagonists, Gorik Baiukov and Georgii Zybin, immediately indicates a fundamental difference between *Ischeznovenie* and *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*. Gorik is a young man brimming with vitality and enthusiasm. He idealizes Moscow, not realising the hardships he will face when he gets there, and the passage which describes the delight he takes in his work at a factory is painted in decidedly Socialist Realist tones. We read:

> Sometimes, looking at how the brand-new, exact, faceted section slid slowly, with difficulty, with a squeak even, out of the rectangle of the mould, Igor' experienced an almost physical feeling of

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 29.
[19] Woodward, "Cosmic", pp. 896-7.

> satisfaction: a new thing had been created, the world was enriched with a new thing, made with his help, by his hands. (p. 175)

Zybin, in contrast, is a mature, erudite man who chooses to defy the authorities. Critics almost unanimously draw attention to his role as the "keeper" of those universal values which are being undermined by the *organy*. Both Cathala and Anisimov and Emtsev refer to Zybin as the "keeper of human memory";[20] Olga Hassanoff calls him the "keeper of those good human qualities which have become antiquities in the 30s in Stalin's Russia";[21] while Nikolaev describes him as the "keeper of those absolute concepts, of eternal spiritual ideas and values ("antiquities"), upheld from time immemorial".[22] Zybin thus plays a role as the defender of those values which are being threatened by the Stalinist Terror, a role for which Igor' Baiukov is obviously not equipped. While Trifonov merely records the effects of the Terror on the family of a leading Party official, Dombrovskii's novel interprets the events as an episode in the universal and timeless struggle between Good and Evil.

In conclusion therefore, although the two works are in some respects typical in their representation of the Purge years, Dombrovskii's novel differs as it redefines the events specifically as a struggle between two opposing systems of belief. His "keeper of antiquities" is prepared to defend all those cultural values that the Stalinist regime tries to sweep away, and ultimately it is Zybin who emerges victorious.

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[20] See Cathala, p. 444; Anisimov and Emtsev, "Etot khranitel' drevnostei", p. 715.
[21] Hassanoff, p. 196.
[22] Nikolaev, p. 200.

Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei and Rybakov's *Deti Arbata*

Anatolii Rybakov began work on *Deti Arbata* in 1966. It was finally published, however, twenty years later during the *glasnost'* years.[23] In an interview following its publication the author was asked if he had expected to wait such a long time for it to be published when he had started writing. Rybakov sanguinely replied, "I understood that at that time it couldn't appear in print, but for goods to appear in a shop, they need first of all to have been produced in a factory. It's the same here."[24]

The similarity of the novel's fate in this sense to that of Dombrovskii's *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, and indeed Trifonov's *Ischeznovenie* is immediately obvious. Like these two novels, *Deti Arbata* was written over an extended period of time, only to see publication in the relaxed political atmosphere of the late 1980s.[25] There is also an obvious thematic similarity, as all three novels analyse the Terror that swept the Soviet Union during the 1930s.

Deti Arbata is set in the years 1933-4 and, as the title suggests, charts the experiences of a group of childhood friends from Moscow. It had been Rybakov's original plan to introduce seven main characters – Sasha, Iura, Varia, Nina, Lena, Maksim and Vadim – and subsequently to write a book on each of them.[26] The second part of this plan never materialized, but these seven characters duly appear on the pages of *Deti Arbata*. The narrative is dominated by three of them: Iura, Varia and, in particular, Sasha.

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[23] The first part of the novel was announced for publication in *Novyi mir* in 1966, the second in *Oktiabr'* in 1978. On neither of these two occasions was anything published. See Irina Rishina, "Zarubki na serdtse", *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 1987, August 19, Vol. 34, p. 4.

[24] A. Zotikov, "Interv'iu posle poezdki: Rabotat' na perestroiku", *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 1988, December 7, Vol. 49, p. 7.

[25] Both *Deti Arbata* and *Ischeznovenie* appeared in 1987; *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* emerged a year later, although it had previously appeared in Paris in 1978.

[26] See his comments to Irina Rishina in *Zarubki na serdtse*, p. 4.

It is more, however, than simply an account of the experiences of a group of Moscow friends in the 30s. It is also an analysis of the political manoeuvres which were taking place at the highest level within the Party. Kirov, Ordzhonikidze, Poskrebyshev and Zhdanov figure directly in the novel, in addition to the most important player of them all – Stalin himself. Stalin also appears in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, as has been discussed in the previous chapter.

There are other common features between the two novels, beyond their depiction of Stalin and their shared theme of the Purge years. Both works have at their heart a single male character whose experiences constitute the main interest of the novel, and in each case, as in *Ischeznovenie*, there is a strong autobiographical basis for the character. Zybin, Dombrovskii's creation, has rightly been called the author's "double" because of the similarity in their circumstances.[27] As for Sasha Pankratov, although his portrait contains elements of Rybakov's biography, he cannot be considered an *alter ego*, as the author himself admits. "Sasha isn't me", he confesses, "I think that he is better than me, as a person. He is a collective image, but in his biography there are also facts about my own life".[28]

Sasha Pankratov is a final-year engineering student who finds himself exiled to Siberia, supposedly for producing an ideologically-flawed wall newspaper for a November 7 Parade (p. 33).[29] He is idealistic and naïve; even after he has been banished to the furthest corner of the Soviet Union, he still proclaims his readiness to fight for his country, much to the bemusement of other exiles (p. 289). His subsequent experiences in the

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[27] See Tkhorzhevskii, p. 194.
[28] Rishina, p. 4.
[29] In truth, he is a pawn in a much larger political game, where the real targets are Lominadze and Sasha's eminent uncle Mark Riazanov (p. 132).

desolate taiga, however, cause him gradually to re-evaluate his life, a "bitter, but necessary and sobering lesson", as Turkov calls it.[30]

The other two main characters in the novel, Iura and Varia, are chiefly developed to act as foils for Sasha. Iurii Sharok is a childhood companion of Sasha who grows up to become a ruthless and cold-hearted NKVD officer. His callous streak is made apparent even before he joins the ranks of the secret police. When his girlfriend Lena Budiagin falls pregnant, he forces her to take a mustard bath which induces miscarriage. He then severs his ties with her (pp. 107-113). His ruthlessness serves to emphasize Sasha's idealism and probity. As Turkov says, Iurii is the "complete antipode" of Sasha Pankratov.[31]

Varia, on the other hand, possesses the same good qualities as Sasha. She is the only one of his friends who doesn't forget his mother, Sof'ia Aleksandrova, who has been left behind in Moscow. Varia's experiences back in the capital are very different from the ones that Sasha undergoes in the frozen wastes of Siberia, yet ultimately they lead to her re-evaluating her life along the same lines as Sasha. For instance, she loses her way both literally and metaphorically when she marries a louche billiard player by the name of Kostia; she marries not out of love, but because she is lured by the bourgeois trappings of money and fine clothes. But she turns her back on this lifestyle and starts work in an architect's office. The sense that she is now back on the right track is communicated in a passage where she praises her workmate in distinctly Socialist Realist tones. She thinks excitedly: "Levochka and Rina are fine fellows! For them restaurants and the Hermitage garden are secondary – the main thing is work on this huge construction in the centre of Moscow" (p. 366). As a final confirmation that Varia is now

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[30] A. Turkov, "Chtoby plyt' v revoliutsiiu dal'she", *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 1987, July 6, Vol. 28, p. 4.
[31] Ibid..

following the same path of development as Sasha, she starts visiting Mikhail Iur'evich, one of Sof'ia's neighbours, on her free evenings (p. 408). Mikhail has a vast collection of books, and Sasha regularly used to call on him before he was exiled.

The narrative of *Deti Arbata* is structured around four leading characters: Sasha, Varia, Iurii and Stalin. Rybakov develops their stories side-by-side. We alternate between the ordeals Sasha is undergoing in the bleak town of Mozgova, to Stalin dining in Sochi with his colleagues, and back to Varia's troubles. The switches between characters and settings heighten the differences in the situations in which the individuals find themselves. For example, one of Sasha's fellow exiles, Boris, encounters a local Siberian girl en route to his final destination. Despite having seen her only once, Boris falls in love with her and vows that he will marry her (p. 290). Immediately after Boris's protestation of love, the scene switches to Varia and Kostia. Varia has agreed to go to the Crimea with Kostia for purely materialistic reasons, and not because she loves him (p. 296). The nobility of the emotions expressed by Boris is thus heightened through comparison with Varia's feelings for Kostia and, by the same token, the falseness of Varia's position exposed.

The switches between the stories also serve to emphasize the similarities in the experiences of the characters. The schoolteacher, Zida, with whom Sasha has a relationship, offers Sasha a chance to escape from exile by returning with her to her village and adopting her name. This Sasha is not prepared to do. He says, "I was born with this surname and I'll die with it. There will be no changes" (p. 360). Shortly after this exchange, Varia is shown to take a similar stance. Her boss gives her an eight-page form to fill in and he advises her to ignore the questions relating to Kostia (something she could perfectly legitimately do, as their marriage has yet to be officially registered). Varia refuses point-blank to take such a

course of action. She says "whatever Kostia may be, I'm not prepared to hide him" (p. 367). Varia thus demonstrates the same pride as that shown by Sasha and is similarly willing to face the consequences of her actions.

The switches that take place between the stories of Sasha and Stalin serve to underline the absurd yet horrifying nature of the events which took place during the 1930s. When his Estonian gardener complains that his wife has been cheated in a shop, Stalin orders a draft resolution to be drawn up to eliminate such underhand practices (p. 348). The ridiculousness of this move is underscored by the terrifying revelation that Stalin intends the "crime" to carry a ten-year sentence. The scene then switches to Sasha, who is in despair after his attempts to help the local people fix a separator end with him being accused of sabotage (p. 349). We thus see the human price of the capriciousness which has just been demonstrated by Stalin.

There are numerous other innocent casualties to be found in *Deti Arbata*. In the course of his travels, Sasha comes across Anton Semenovich, a chef who has been exiled because he had "lazy cabbage" on his menu (p. 298). Although the term relates to a special method of cooking, the authorities decided to interpret it as a slur on shockworkers instead, and accordingly meted out the appropriate punishment. Another exile, Ivashkin, is on his way to Siberia simply because of a spelling mistake. In one of Stalin's speeches he had accidentally printed *skryt'* ("to hide"), instead *vskryt'* ("to reveal"). As a result of this all too human mistake, Ivashkin and five of his colleagues were arrested and imprisoned (p. 233).

Rybakov, like Dombrovskii, demonstrates the way in which the people's belief in Stalin and the regime was paradoxically increased by the events that were taking place around them. Varia's sister Nina seems to sum up the general view held by the characters in the novel. To begin

with she had claimed that Sasha's arrest had been an absurd chance incident, but gradually she changes her mind and concedes that perhaps it did have "some foundation" (p. 325). She comes to the conclusion that even if it was a mistake, then Soviet power has "nothing to do with it". She continues:

> No power is safe from making mistakes. And, when there is a bitter class struggle going on in the country, when the Party has to liquidate the remnants of hostile parties, factions and opposition, individual mistakes are all the more inevitable. (p. 373)

Even Sasha, who has been exiled to a Siberia for no good reason, refuses to stop believing in the Party. He admits that they are "making mistakes, lots of mistakes", but says that he cannot believe that sabotage has been "dreamed up as a method of State politics". To believe that, he says, means to "stop believing in the Party and I, in spite of everything that has happened to me, believe in the Party" (p. 322).

One of the reasons it was so difficult to believe that the Party was falsely accusing and imprisoning people on such a massive scale is because ostensibly life had once again assumed its natural rhythm. People were relieved that all the upheavals they had faced in the post-Revolutionary years appeared to be over. This is precisely the conclusion that Kirov comes to after analysing the people's faith in Stalin. He thinks to himself: "The people liked his [Stalin's] greatness, liked the fact that after so many years of collapse, Civil War and Party infighting that order had descended, and they identified that order with Stalin" (p. 439). The contrast between the majestic facade of Stalin's regime and its sordid reality is nowhere more explicitly demonstrated than in the passage which describes the events going on outside the Butyrka prison alongside those happening inside. Sasha has been held in the Butyrka for three weeks and while he is languishing in a cell all by himself, there are parades going on

outside. We are told that "at the same time that Muscovites were walking through Red Square, which was illuminated by searchlights, and greeting Stalin, who was standing on the Mausolem, in the Butyrka prison it was time for dinner" (p. 94). The pomp and ceremony that accompanied Stalin wherever he went was more than an ample disguise for the policy of terror which he was implementing.

Sasha's short stay in the Butyrka prior to his exile introduces another element into *Deti Arbata*: the depiction of prison life, which is also a feature of *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*. In the passages relating to the prison Rybakov emphasizes the loneliness felt by Sasha. During his sojourn he sees a sum total of two other prisoners, and the only way of actually communicating with anyone else involves a complex system of knocking on the walls (p. 95). As if to reinforce the isolation, there is not even a mirror in the cells, which means that Sasha cannot see what he looks like with his newly-grown beard (p. 136).

Rybakov also gives us an account of the process of interrogation that Sasha undergoes. This aspect is examined more fully in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, but the verbal attacks to which prisoners were subjected is made clear in *Deti Arbata*. For example, when Sasha continues to protest his innocence D'iakov, the interrogating officer, contemptuously spits out "so then, you were arrested for no reason whatsoever? We imprison innocent people do we? Even here you are continuing your counter-revolutionary agitation..." (p. 100). The authorities' intransigence is thus immediately conveyed to the reader.

Rybakov hints at the desperate thoughts that can occur to a man when he is being subjected to such unfair treatment. In the course of his interrogation, Sasha notices that the only things separating him from D'iakov are an inkwell set and a large paperweight. He immediately thinks about how easy it would be to grab the paperweight and smash it

over D'iakov's head (p. 119). Interestingly, this is precisely the course of action taken by Karl Voitsik in Dombrovskii's novel *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom*.[32]

Sasha Pankratov, however, takes no such dramatic action and is sent on his way to Siberia. It is on this long journey that the importance of nature in the novel is gradually introduced. The first hint of the significance of this theme occurs when the exiles make a stopover in a forest. As they sit around a campfire, they suddenly feel a sense of contentment and freedom. The smell of the pine-trees and burnt *kasha* takes them back to their childhood (p. 233). This sense of communion with nature grows in Sasha as he nears Mozgova. The great Angara river has a particularly profound effect on him. His awe is conveyed in the following passage. We read: "the calm, powerful river, the blue rock faces, the boundless taiga, the sun in the blue sky - all this was lavishly and plentifully created for the good of mankind" (p. 292).

This backdrop sets the scene for Sasha's re-evaluation of his life and beliefs. It is the vastness of nature which helps him realise the "great eternity" that surrounds him, to quote Turkov, and his place in it.[33] The moment that he becomes aware of the insignificance of his own existence occurs when he is standing by the grave of Kartsev, an exile who dies on his way to Siberia:

> He suddenly felt a keen sense of the insignificance of his own misfortunes and sufferings. This great eternity strengthened his belief in something higher than that for which he'd lived up until now. Those who sent people into exile were losing their way, thinking that this was how to break a man. You could kill him, yes, but never break him (p. 250).

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[32] Voitsik hits his interrogating officer, Kurzer, over the head with a paperweight and throws him out of a fifth-floor window. See *Sobr. soch*, II, p. 344..

[33] Turkov, p. 4.

This vista on to a greater reality than our own ties in with the theme of history in the novel. We are reminded throughout of the wider historical context of the terrible events that are taking place. For instance, the unstoppable march of time is emphasized in this following passage relating to the New Year's Eve party held by Sasha and his friends:

> The planet rushes along its inexorable path, the celestial world completes its eternal movement, and they met in the one thousand nine hundred and thirty fourth year from the birth of Christ; they had vodka, port and riesling, and this was how they'd seen in the one thousand nine hundred and thirty third year ... and how they would see in the thirty fifth, and the thirty sixth, and the thirty seventh and many more years besides.(p. 57)

This indirect assertion that Stalin's terror is inevitably going to pass is reaffirmed by the reference to the cosmos, to the "celestial world" completing its "eternal movement". Within the context of time and the cosmos, the events of 1934-7 in the Soviet Union are a temporary, albeit tragic, glitch.

Stalin himself tries to make his mark on history more permanent by trying to have it rewritten. When Enukidze issues a pamphlet which rightly states that Stalin knew nothing about a secret printing press in Baku in the years before the Revolution, Stalin orders Kirov to write a history book refuting this. Kirov is staggered by the ridiculousness of the suggestion: "his participation in work on a history textbook was fiction – what sort of an historian was he! Stalin wasn't an historian either, but he certainly considered himself to be one" (p. 387). As Kirov realises, an individual cannot overcome history. He knows Stalin's influence to be transient, in spite of his attempts to immortalize himself. He concludes to himself:

> You cannot govern it [the Soviet Union] by terror. Science, culture and technology demand a free exchange of thoughts. Violence will become a barrier on the country's path to development. Marxism

> teaches that the objective laws of history are higher and more powerful than an individual personality.(p. 441)

The assassination of Kirov, with which *Deti Arbata* concludes, proves that Stalin hasn't given up either trying to govern the country by terror or to overcome the objective laws of history.

Deti Arbata shares much in common with Dombrovskii's *Fakultet nenuzhnykh veshchei*. As has been mentioned, both novels revolve around the story of a single male character. In each the storylines of different characters are developed as a means of illuminating what is happening to the main character. The most obvious example of this in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* is the story of Kornilov in Part III of the novel, from which Zybin is completely absent. Kornilov is very much like Zybin; he too was brought up in Moscow before being exiled to Kazakhstan, and he is similarly erudite. Indeed, throughout *Khranitel' drevnostei* it seems like it is he who is, in the words of Jean Cathala, the novel's "designated victim".[34] Unlike Zybin, however, he is prepared to co-operate with the authorities. When they approach him to give them information on Kutorga, a corrupt former priest, he willingly obliges, only to end up hoisted by his own petard. Zybin's moral probity in refusing to collaborate with the secret police is thus made to seem all the more laudable.

Another satellite story in the novel is that of the NKVD officer Neiman. As he tries to unravel the mystery surrounding the gold which has gone missing from the museum, Neiman gradually comes to terms with some truths about his own life. The event which acts as a catalyst for the re-evaluation of his beliefs is his encounter with a drowned girl on the banks of the river Ili.[35] The profound effect that this experience has on Neiman

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[34] Cathala, p. 438.
[35] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Sobr. soch.*, V, p. 597.

is communicated by the parallel that is drawn between him and Moses. As Neiman walks away from the scene at daybreak, he throws a match into a bush, which subsequently catches fire.[36] For Neiman, as for Moses, the burning bush heralds the beginning of a new life. Neiman thus changes from being a NKVD officer with a permanent look of fear in his eyes, to a man who begins to realise the value of the truth and justice represented by Zybin.

One of the features of the Purge years which Dombrovskii, like Rybakov, chooses to expose is the absurdity of the events that were taking place. In those days even something as innocuous as an anecdote could earn you a prison term. Zybin muses on the ridculousness of this situation. Alone in his cell he thinks: "Anecdotes are at the moment very costly; the most ordinary one, without even any humour, brings with it five years, and furthermore, if there is a reference to comrade Stalin, then you won't get away with less than eight".[37]

As has been seen in *Deti Arbata*, a mere spelling mistake can land you a lengthy prison sentence. In *Khranitel' drevnostei*, the first part of the composite novel *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, Dombrovskii similarly demonstrates how a spelling mistake can have potentially serious consequences. Aiupova, the head of the Municipal library in Alma-Ata, is enraged after reading an article which criticizes the way in which her establishment is run. One of her main objections is that the article refers to a certain "Popiatna" who allegedly helped the author, Zybin, when he came to look around the library. In a vicious exchange Aiupova angrily accuses Zybin of making up fictional library staff, as she knows of no-one by the name of Popiatna.[38] In truth the whole misunderstanding is

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[36] *Ibid.*, pp. 607-8.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 201.
[38] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Sobr. soch.*, IV, pp. 102-3.

nothing more than a typing error, whereby the typist had put "Popiatna" instead of *poniatno* ("understood").

The ludicrous nature of the arrests and accusations of this period meant that people were unable to see that the whole thing was being orchestrated by the State. Dombrovskii, like Rybakov, demonstrates how the people's belief in the State and their leader was strengthened rather than weakened by the strange events going on around them. Potapov, the leader of the local *kolkhoz* brigade, seems to be representative in this respect. Although he knows that the case against his brother, who is now in prison camp, is founded on false evidence, he nevertheless still expresses wholehearted faith in the secret police. When Kornilov is summoned by the NKVD, he exhorts him to tell them the truth. He tries to reassure Kornilov, telling him: "They're not some sort of fascist Gestapo, you know, but our own Soviet organy! Lenin's Cheka! Tell the truth and nothing will happen to you - do you understand, the truth!".[39] As Potapov should well know, the truth counts for little within the walls of the NKVD offices.

One of Zybin's cellmates, the Georgian Kalandarashvili, has his own explanation as to why people seem to be adopting some sort of collective ostrich position. He tells Zybin that people aren't merely pretending not to see what is going on; they are genuinely "immune to the truth".[40] He qualifies this statement, saying that they are not, of course, immune to all the truth, merely to "certain sides of it". In other words there is some sort of defence mechanism that prevents man believing something that threatens his status quo.

Dombrovskii offers another explanation, which runs along the same lines as that forwarded by Rybakov. In *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* it

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[39] *Sobr. soch.*, V, p. 272.
[40] *Ibid.*, p. 478.

is hinted that the reason that people find it so difficult to make the connection between the State and the terror which is being perpetrated is that outwardly life appears to be so normal. The contrast between what is going on inside the NKVD buildings and what is happening outside is neatly demonstrated by the frequent references to the sounds coming from the park located opposite them. In the course of his interviews with the NKVD Kornilov is aware of various sounds in the background: the voices of children playing, the strains of an orchestra and the sound of a merry-go-round in the background.[41]

The huge discrepancy between the horror of what was going on behind the scenes and the gaudy facade of everyday life is underlined in the following passage. The omniscient narrator, musing about the beautiful women that were constantly appearing on posters during that period, suddenly tells us that this was the time when the number of prisoners was more than ten million:

> It was in those very years that the number of prisoners, according to the most conservative of calculations, exceeded ten million ... In those years parks of culture flourished, fireworks were commonplace and many carousels, attractions and dance floors were built. And never had the country danced and sung as much as in those years. And never had the shop-windows been so pretty, the prices so stable and the money so easy.[42]

With conditions such as these prevailing among the general populace, is it any wonder that people found it hard to believe that the State had falsely imprisoned millions of its citizens?

Dombrovskii attempts to show us what life was like for those ten million not lucky enough to be enjoying the newly opened parks. He achieves this by painting a vivid picture of prison life. Like Sasha Pankratov, Zybin keenly misses not having a mirror in his cell (his request for one

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[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 303, 371.
[42] *Ibid.*, pp. 239-40.

has Khripushin in a paroxysm of fury).[43] There are, however, far worse things than this to endure. When Zybin goes on hunger-strike in a protest at his arrest, he is sent to an isolation cell, which is little more than a bare room with a concrete floor.[44] As Zybin later discovers, there are even worse cells than this. On one occasion he is temporarily moved into a different isolation cell, and is horrified by what he finds. Here, even though it is broad daylight, the cell is plunged in almost complete darkness:

> Instead of a window, beneath the there was a dull yellow strip of light about the size of a brick, coming through a grille. The wooden bed had its legs sunk into the cement. The close-stool was chained up, with a lock on it. A small piece of wood stuck out from the wall - it was a table. A quarter of the cell was taken up by a massive protruding brick wall, like that found in a Russian kiln. There was no room to walk around. He sat on the bed and put his hand in front of his face. He was unable to see his palm.[45]

One of the things that keeps Zybin going in the face of such awful conditions is nature. He gains strength in particular from the poplar trees which he sees from the windows of his interrogation room.[46] The theme of nature is prominent in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnkyh veshchei*, even more so than it is in Rybakov's novel. This subject has already been dealt with in the preceding chapters, but there is one passage relating to nature which echoes the account of the exiles sitting *alfresco* around a camp fire in *Deti Arbata*. Miachin, the Public Prosecutor, is describing the scene that greets him upon his visit to a transit camp. He tells his NKVD colleagues:

> These ragamuffins and sickly specimens were the happiest people in the world. They already had nothing more to fear! They weren't being shot. They weren't being beaten. And the worst of it was

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[43] *Ibid.*, p. 231.
[44] *Ibid.*, p. 381.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 489.
[46] *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 194, 245, 390.

> already past - the icy boxes, the cement isolation cells, the freezing cells, the standing up, the insomnia. They once again trampled the grass beneath their feet, got wet with the dew, basked in the sun. And, in all honesty, what more does a man need?"[47]

The joy experienced by these prisoners clearly echoes the sentiments of Sasha Pankratov and his fellow exiles as they marvel at the pine-forest.

In *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* the influence of the cosmos behind the events which are unfolding in the novel is clearly sensed. For example, Zybin, after spending an evening with Klara and Lina, muses to himself about everything that is going on within the world. He thinks: "Something completely unusual was happening in the world. Some sort of monstrous black solar flares were swirling around the earth and were sweeping away everything in their path".[48] The rise of Stalin and Hitler is presented as being almost the result of some mysterious alignment of the planets. This idea is supported by the statement, in one of the closing paragraphs of the novel, that the Earth was moving into the "black, bemisted realms" and "poisonous radiations" of Cancer and Scorpio in which "life becomes completely intolerable".[49]

This "cosmic" aspect is reinforced in the novel by the portrayal of the maverick artist Kalmykov. Kalmykov dresses to impress not his fellow men but the denizens of the Galaxy.[50] He is also preoccupied with the concept of time and space. It is therefore fitting that he should be present in the closing scene of *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, when Dombrovskii fits all the events of the novel into their temporal and spatial context. After referring to the "wise martians" looking down approvingly on Kalmykov, Dombrovskii concludes the work in the following way. He says:

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[47] *Ibid.*, pp. 406-7.
[48] *Ibid.* p. 111.
[49] *Ibid.* p. 628.
[50] *Ibid.* p. 65.

> This entire unhappy story took place in the fifty-eighth year from the birth of the leader of peoples Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin and in the one thousand, nine hundred and thirty-seventh year from the birth of Christ - a hot, inauspicious year that was pregnant with the terrible future.[51]

Here, as in the passage from *Deti Arbata* relating to the 1934 New Year's Eve party, the events are placed in the framework of history since the birth of Christ.

For all the features it shares in common with Rybakov's novel, there are certain things on which *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* clearly differs. One of the most important differences is in the portrayal of the central character. Sasha Pankratov, a young man "burning with genuine enthusiasm", in the words of Turkov,[52] resembles Trifonov's Gorik Baiukov more closely than he does the erudite and philosophical Zybin. Another feature which distinguishes *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* from both *Deti Arbata* and *Izcheznovenie* is the depiction of the struggle between the protagonist and the authorities in terms of a battle of good versus evil, as has been discussed in relation to Trifonov's novel. Finally the backdrop of Dombrovskii's novel also sets it apart. While *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* is set against the luxuriant flora and fauna of Central Asia, Rybakov's work focuses on Moscow and Siberia.

As a critique of the Purge years, *Deti Arbata* has much in common with *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*. Both depict Stalin as an actual character; both draw similar conclusions about the refusal of the *narod* to recognise what was going on around them; and both works attempt to put the events of the 1930s within a wider historical context. Dombrovskii's novel is distinguished from Rybakov's, however, by the presentation of the

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[51] *Ibid.*, p. 628.
[52] Turkov, p. 4.

struggle between its main character and the authorities as part of the age-old struggle between good and evil.

Chapter 10 - Conclusions

1) The Thought of Dombrovskii

One of Dombrovskii's friends from labour camp, commenting on his steadfastness, likened him to an "arrow in flight, which never changed the direction of its trajectory".[1] This metaphor could equally as well be applied to concerns of his fiction. From his first novel *Derzhavin* to his *magnum opus Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* the themes which identify Dombrovskii as a writer remain constant. The theme of betrayal and justice and the concept of the immortality of art in opposition to the transience of totalitarianism is charted throughout the body of his fiction, yet it is the conflict between Good and Evil which dominates each work. For every novel is a reworking of this age-old battle, and the central character in each faces anew the challenge of reborn evil. Invariably, good prevails, although sometimes the human cost of this victory, as in *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom*, is a high one. The unceasing optimism of the works, is, one feels, a testimony to Dombrovskii's own faith in the human spirit. For a man whose own life was so adversely affected by Stalin's regime, this affirmation of the supremacy of good over evil is remarkable. Even his depiction of Stalin in *Fakul'tet nenuznykh veshchei* is free from any bitterness, in contrast to the approach taken by Solzhenitsyn to the same subject.

Gastev has commented that Dombrovskii was an "irreligious man" for whom there was "no other choice but to stand one's ground".[2] This is clearly the message that emerges in his fiction. Dombrovskii demonstrates how for men of conscience such as Zybin, Leon

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[1] Chabua Amiredzhibi, quoted in Shtokman, p. 84.
[2] Gastev, p. 6.

Maisonnier, Shakespeare and Derzhavin, there is ultimately only one option when confronted with evil, and that is to resist.

For those characters who yield to evil Dombrovskii makes his contempt known. Lanet, Buddo, Kornilov and Kutorga emerge in the course of the novels as feeble cowards whose attempts at self-justification ring hollow. The prominence of betrayal as a theme in the fiction is due, we may infer, to the strength of Dombrovskii's own feelings towards those who betrayed the trust of others. In a letter to a friend, he declared that "everything can be forgiven and understood, except the absence of trust in a person who you know, love, and with whom you are friendly".[3]

Despite Dombrovskii's obvious abhorrence of treachery, it is significant the traitors in his works are not brought to justice. For example, the treachery of the holy man Iov who double-crosses Derzhavin is never discovered. By the same token Lanet, who betrayed his colleague, Maisonnier, during the second World War is shown to be flourishing years later as the editor of a newspaper. Likewise, while the innocent Zybin languishes in prison, the police informer Kornilov remains at liberty. That these traitors remain unpunished in the novels is testimony to Dombrovskii's dispassionate approach to the subject. As Iurii Davydov has noted, Dombrovskii doesn't indulge in writing "parables".[4] He instead presents the facts to us, allowing us to draw our own moral from the story.

We may also assume that the reason why Dombrovskii does not provide us with "parables" is perhaps because in his works no character is depicted as completely good or evil. Even Zybin, who emerges in the course of the bi-partite novel *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* as a latter-day Christ is shown capable of doing wrong. This is illustrated in the

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[3] "Stol'ko perezhili, shto bessmertny", p. 111.
[4] Iu. Davydov, "Pogovorim o burnykh dniakh Kavkaza ...", in *Derzhavin*, Moscow, 1985, p. 5.

episode in which he captures a crab and leaves it to die in a bucket under its bed. It is only after a week that he suddenly comes to his senses and decides to release the creature back into the sea. The point is made, however, that man is fundamentally weak and susceptible to wrong-doing. Zybin himself is amazed at his cruelty. "I would never have thought that I could have been such a beast!", he tells his lover Lina. "To condemn a creature to a slow and excruciating death. I would never have believed that I was capable of such a thing!".[5] If Zybin, who is upheld in the novel as the epitome of good, is capable of evil, then we may absolve weaker characters such as Kornilov, Kutorga and Stalin of blame for their actions. The message which thus emerges is that there are "no evildoers and righteous men" in Dombrovskii's fiction, only people – and people are "weak".[6]

Man's inherent weakness, suggested in the novels by the frequent evocations of Genesis, contributes to the distinctive vision of history which emerges in the novels. The characters on the pages of Dombrovskii's works are seen as players in the "recurrent drama" between good and evil which has taken place throughout the ages. For characters such as Derzhavin and Shakespeare, this struggle assumes the form of a conflict between their art and their sordid reality, whereas for others, such as Maisonnier and Zybin, the struggle is literal, as they face the might of evil, despotic regimes. The common denominator in all the novels, however, is that good ultimately prevails.

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[5] Iu. Dombrovskii, *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, in *Sobr. soch.*, V, p. 265.
[6] Tsvetkov, p. 116.

2 The Art of Dombrovskii

The continuity of Dombrovskii's art, like that of his thought, is evident in the body of his fiction. The basic stylistic features of *Derzhavin*, for example, recur in his subsequent works. Notable in this respect is the use of description. Poremba has commented that Dombrovskii was a "remarkable story-teller"[7] and this is plain from the vivid descriptions which grace the pages of his works. Dombrovskii engages all the reader's senses in bringing a scene to life, and it is this attention to detail which makes his recreation of scenes, from Elizabethan England to seventeenth-century Russia, so authentic. Even his depiction of a "foreign way of life" in *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom* is, as Kosenko notes, remarkable for its authenticity, since Dombrovskii never went abroad.[8]

Another reason why Dombrovskii emerges as a remarkable "story-teller" is that all his novels, despite their philosophical basis, have a fast-moving plot which keeps the reader interested. Latynina has commented on the "strong element of the picaresque" in *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, with its missing gold, hidden treasure and a hero who goes through all sorts of tribulations to emerge at the end victorious.[9] These features of the picaresque are equally apparent in the preceding novels, and it is these which make the works such compulsive reading. Thus, we want to know what happens to Derzhavin as he plans his march on Iaik; we want to know the true identity of the mysterious Kurt in *Obez'iana prikhodit za svoim cherepom*; and we want to know if Zybin's "sleeping beauty" is ever found.

Although Dombrovskii's novels abound with rich descriptions, the tautness of his prose is never compromised. In this respect he plainly

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[7] Poremba, p. 124.
[8] Kosenko, p. 64.
[9] Latynina, p.4.

emulates two writers whom he acknowledges influenced him greatly: Tynianov and Hemingway. Dombrovskii's prose is like that of both these writers: precise, clear and sharp, with no unnecessary embellishments. Hemingway also influenced Dombrovskii's approach to his subject matter. Dombrovskii recalls how Hemingway asserted that "there was never any need to teach the reader anything, to explain anything to him. He is clever, he will work it out for himself".[10]

Dombrovskii too makes us work things out for ourselves, as his use of repeated textual "echoes" indicates. These echoes serve to highlight important themes in the novel by keeping certain connected images in the forefront of our minds. This technique is not apparent to any extent in *Derzhavin*, but it becomes gradually more prominent in the subsequent fiction. These textual echoes which force the readers, as Cathala says, to "grope their way along",[11] add to the detective story element which is present in the fiction.

3) Dombrovskii and Soviet Literature

When Dombrovskii died on 29 May 1978, the event went practically unmarked in the Soviet literary press. *Literaturnaia gazeta* didn't even grant him a routine obituary and, although an obituary did appear in *Literaturnaia Rossiia*, it was the size of a "postage stamp".[12] Yet this was an author of six major works, whose prose had been translated into many languages of the world and who had been recognised by Jean-Paul Sartre as the "last classical author".[13] The reasons as to why this "outstanding prose writer"[14] was passed over in this fashion lie in his long-running

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[10] Iu. Dombrovskii, "Pis'mo Sergeiu Antonovu", *Sobr. soch.*, VI, p. 328.
[11] Cathala, p. 436.
[12] Shenfel'd, p. 351.
[13] See Anisimov and Emtsev, "Proza, stat'i, pis'ma", *Nashe nasledie*, Vol. 20, 1991, No. 2, p. 98.
[14] Anisimov and Emtsev, "Etot khranitel' drevnostei. (O pisatele Iurii Dombrovskom i ego knigakh)", in Iu. Dombrovskii, *Fakul'tet nenuzhnykh veshchei*, Moscow, 1989, p. 708.

conflict with the Soviet regime, outlined in Chapter 1, which cost him nearly twenty-five years of his liberty.

Even if his biography had been less controversial, the press would have still struggled to produce an obituary for this extraordinary writer. This is because Dombrovskii didn't belong to any particular school of writing. As Poremba says, he "isn't a village prose writer, isn't a writer on social themes, nor does he 'expose' domestic 'secrets' of Muscovites".[15] From his harrowing biography, we may perhaps assume therefore that, like Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov, Dombrovskii embraced the tradition of labour camp writing. Yet this is also false, for Dombrovskii doesn't indulge in graphic descriptions of the horrors of camp-life. How then are we to define him as a writer?

The answer is that Dombrovskii is a truly unique writer. He was influenced by contemporaries, such as Bulgakov, and shared certain common features of Trifonov and Rybakov in his approach to the Stalinist Terror. Yet ultimately he belongs in a class all of his own. The clarity of his prose; the rich symbolism of his narrative; the psychological depth of his characters; the philosophical basis of his novels – all these factors give his work its distinctive character. The possibilities of his prose are endless, and, as we approach the millennium we may hope that in the next century Dombrovskii is finally given the full recognition he deserves as one of the greatest Soviet writers of the twentieth-century.

[15] Poremba, p. 119.

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